

Carlos Alberto Montaner es uno de los periodistas más leídos del mundo hispánico. La revista Poder calculó en seis millones los lectores que semanalmente se asoman a sus columnas y artículos, reproducidos en docenas de diarios y revistas. Ha publicado unos veinticinco libros de ensayos y narraciones. Divide su tiempo entre Madrid y Miami.

**A big lie that tells a big truth**

Soon, Mario Vargas Llosa's latest novel, The Celt's Dream, will be unveiled. Happily and coincidentally, it was being printed when the author was awarded the Nobel Prize. Editorial Alfaguara immediately increased the print run tenfold.

The work is a biographical novel about Roger Casement, an Irishman, a remarkable functionary in the British Foreign Office, who was born near Dublin in 1864, when the island was still part of Great Britain, and was hanged in London in 1916, accused of treason for allying himself with the Germans during World War One for the purpose of inciting his fellow Irishmen to rebellion.

Casement, whom the British Crown awarded a knighthood for his services to the commonwealth, had been responsible for the investigation that revealed the genocidal horror of the colonization of the Belgian Congo, a huge parcel of African land graciously ceded to the Belgian royal family during the Conference of Berlin (1885), when the Europeans divided up the black continent among themselves with the excuse of bringing to those “savages” the light of civilization and progress.

Casement proved that, in reality, what the King of the Belgians brought to the Africans was death and the cruelest economic exploitation.

Later, Casement, who in the course of his travels through Africa contracted various diseases and a variant of malaria that periodically cracked his bones, boiled his blood and took him to the brink of death, traveled to Amazonia to investigate the abuses committed by a British rubber company.

What he found was horrifying. The Amazon jungles, where Brazil, Peru and Colombia met, were a green hell where the monstrosities he had seen in Africa were repeated almost identically. In the Congo, the victims were the blacks. In America, the Indians suffered the same fate. It was as if the exploiters' greed automatically generated a single and bloody method to squeeze the workers.

Biographical novels are a tremendous challenge for writers. They take place within a historical framework that cannot be stretched without distorting the narrative. But, at the same time, the narrator must know how to explore the soul of the protagonists, imagine the psychological drives that propel them to act in a certain manner, build scenarios where some obscure events occurred, fabricate characters who serve as counterpoint to express different opinions and points of view, and opt among the diverse interpretations and contradictory information that accompany the lives of all notable persons.

For example, when Roger Casement was tried for treason to England, some intimate diaries that described in scabrous detail his homosexual relations in Africa and Amazonia conveniently appeared. Were they real or were they a fabrication to discredit him in that Victorian England that earlier had sentenced Oscar Wilde to prison for his “inverted” sexuality, as it was then called?

Mario Vargas Llosa opts to admit them as valid, but he does so in a paradoxical way that displays his talent as a novelist or, better yet, as an explorer of the complex psyche of human beings. Throughout the book, brief flashes describe Casement's homosexual encounters with beautiful young men.

However, while the narrator imagines how those happy and agonizing homoerotic moments were, the protagonist denies the veracity of the diaries. The events, according to narrator Vargas Llosa, are true but his character denies them. However, the way in which the diaries are revealed is false.

In a way, that's also the essence of the novel: a big lie that tells a big truth, deeply and painfully buried in the protagonist's heart.

Why, almost 100 years after Casement's execution, does Mario Vargas Llosa raise him from his grave and recreate the drama of his life and death? Because the character and his story have all the ingredients of the always opaque human nature, which is what really interests the great Peruvian writer.

Casement is a hero and a traitor. He is an exemplary man, but his sexual preferences, which spurred him cruelly, pushed him toward a type of relationship that was then despised and vilified. He was a lay saint and an inveterate sinner. He was a universal defender of the victims, whatever their color or country, but ended up being a rabid and sectarian nationalist.

Vargas Llosa realized that Casement's ambiguous life was perfect for the telling. The result is extraordinary.

 \*www.firmaspress.com

November 09, 2010

[**http://www.politics.ie/history/7941-roger-casement-4.html**](http://www.politics.ie/history/7941-roger-casement-4.html)

**The OF blog (Larry)**

**Sunday, November 07, 2010**

**[Mario Vargas Llosa, El sueño del celta (The Celt's Dream)](http://ofblog.blogspot.com/2010/11/mario-vargas-llosa-el-sueno-del-celta.html)**

"I am beginning the return to Boma. According to my plans, I should have stayed in the High Congo for a couple of weeks longer. But, the truth, I already have an excess of material to show en my report the things which occur here. I fear that, from continuing to examine the extremes to which the evilness and ignorance of human beings can arrive, I will not even be capable of writing my *report*. I am on the edge of insanity. A normal human being is not able to submerge himself for so many months in this hell without losing his insanity, without succumbing to some mental disturbance. Some nights, in my insomnia, I feel this is occurring to me. Something is disintegrating in my mind. I live in constant anguish. If I continue jostling myself with what occurs here I myself will also end up imparting whiplashes, chopping off hands and assassinating Congolese between lunch and dinner without producing in myself the least trouble to my conscience nor the loss of appetite. Because that is what occurs to Europeans here in this damned country."

In his first novel to be released after being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in October 2010, Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa continues his recent trend of writing novels dealing with the lives of controversial figures of the past century. Instead of writing about individuals such as those involved in the infamous Trujillo dictatorship (*The Feast of the Goat*) or Post-Impressionist artist Paul Gauguin (*The Way to Paradise*), Vargas Llosa tackles perhaps the most complex historical figure of those he has written about to date: the Irish hero/British traitor Roger Casement.

Even 94 years after his execution for his role in the failed Easter Rebellion, Casement causes controversy on both sides of the Irish Sea. To this date, Casement's body has never been buried in his native County Antrim because of the division between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. When his body was exhumed in the 1960s from the quicklime pit into which the bodies of traitors were buried, the aging first Irish President, Eamon de Valera (himself a leader of the Irish during the civil war/war for independence), defied doctor's orders to not exert himself, just so he could be present when Casement's body was returned to Irish soil. His posthumous legend is still powerful all these generations after his execution, but yet there are troubling issues about his latter years. Why did he switch from being a loyal British Civil Service official in the early 1900s to being the middleman between the German government and the Easter Rebels during World War I? And what about those damning "Black Diaries" that were published in photographed form during his trial that apparently revealed him to be a closet homosexual at best (during a time when homosexuality was a crime punishable by hard labor) and a predatory pedophile at worst?

Vargas Llosa treads carefully through those treacherous waters in this novel. He chooses to tell Casement's story as a sort of confessional, where the condemned Casement reflects back on the turning point in his life. Vargas Llosa's Casement appears to have experienced a sort of epiphany during his time as a British foreign service official in the Belgian Congo. Horrified at the casual cruelties he witnessed there, he goes to the brink of madness before deciding that what truly horrifies him is the hypocrisy of himself, a native son of Ireland, helping Ireland's oppressor force the African nations into the same imperialistic chains which first had been clasped around Ireland. Vargas Llosa does not settle for the easy way of just highlighting only the possible reasons behind his radicalization after 1910, but he also tackles the issue of the "Black Diaries" in a way that does not deny the likelihood that said diaries are genuine (I myself still retain some doubt as to their authenticity, but that is a story for another time and place), but also without judging Casement for his actions.

The result of this "middle ground" approach is the portrayal of Casement as neither saint nor devil. Vargas Llosa presents him as a conflicted, complex individual who warred with his own self as much as he did in his latter struggles against the forces of imperialist aggression, whether they be present in the Congo River valley, the interior of Brazil, or Ireland after the latest round of Home Rule talks had been suspended on the eve of World War I. Vargas Llosa's prose is elegant but never verbose. He does not eschew criticizing his subject whenever Casement's actions warrants such treatment, but he also portrays this historical figure as containing admirable elements. Through it all, Vargas Llosa chooses to emphasize the humanitarian aspects, even when those aspects falter in the face of Casement's many personal demons.

*El sueño del celta* works as a historical novel because Vargas Llosa keeps the focus squarely on Casement and his internal and external struggles. Despite the jumping back and forth in the narrative between 1910 and 1916, there is rarely confusion about the sequence of events. If anything, the "present day" scenes serve to reinforce the developments shown in the extended flashback sequences. The end result of this is a vivid portrayal of a fascinating historical figure, told in crisp, evocative prose that adds vitality to the scenes without distorting what happened during this time. *El sueño del celta* may not be one of Vargas Llosa's greatest novels, but it certainly is a very good piece that compares favorably to most of his outstanding œvre. Highly recommended to both Spanish speakers and to English readers whenever the translation comes out in the next year or two.

His study of the Uruguayan novelist Onetti came out in late 2008, and his novel on Roger Casement, **El sueño del celta** (**The Dream of the Celt**) will be published in Spanish in early November. We await the letters of Doña Lucrecia, the ‘stepmother’ in his first two playful erotic novels, [In Praise of the Stepmother](http://www.faber.co.uk/work/in-praise-of-stepmother/9780571141357/) and [The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto](http://www.faber.co.uk/work/notebooks-of-don-rigoberto/9780571195756/).

So, in some four years: two plays, a book-length study of a writer and a complex novel. Plus, of course, all the things that the five-year plan does not mention: writing a newspaper column every fortnight, delivering lectures throughout the world, which are later published as major essays – Oxford was treated to a series of lectures on Victor Hugo, which later appeared as the book, [The Temptation of the Impossible](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Temptation-Impossible-Victor-Hugo-Miserables/dp/0691131112/ref%3Dtmm_hrd_title_0) (2007) – teaching, researching.

The novel on Roger Casement is a good example of this life in movement that finds the stillness for writing and reading. W. B.Yeats imagines exploring the life of Casement:

*‘I poked about a village church
And found the family tomb
And copied out what I could read
In that religious gloom.’
— W. B. Yeats, ‘The Ghost of Roger Casement’*



Mario Vargas Llosa

This is also how Vargas Llosa conducts his research, although his travels for this novel have taken him far beyond the family tomb: revisiting the Peruvian Amazon jungle that he first explored as a student in 1958, following Casement’s journeys through the Congo, exploring Casement’s childhood in Ballymena, following the routes of the Seanchaithe, the Irish story tellers, and describing the natural beauty of Murlough Bay, where Casement had hoped to be buried.

It was on one of his research trips to Ireland that I realized that I would never keep up. I had emailed Rosario de Bedoya, his splendid secretary and archivist in Lima, to let me know next time Mario would be visiting Ireland, since I had a few questions about Casement for him. Three hours later, that evening, I received an email back from Lima, saying that Mario was in Belfast and could meet me the next day in Dublin, just before catching a flight out, and that I should phone his wife Patricia in Madrid, so that she could ring Mario to make the arrangement. All I had to do was rearrange some things and find a flight from Birmingham. But I didn’t make it and Mario flew off to another destination, always active, always curious.

**‘Ithaka gave you the splendid journey.’**

In this constant journey, the Nobel Prize is an agreeable port of call. But when he delivers his acceptance speech in December, his readers will be with Casement in the heart of the Congo, or awaiting news from Doña Lucrecia. Time for him to pause, perhaps, to survey the landscape of more than fifty years of writing. But no time to stop.

*John King
University of Warwick*

In November he will hold a lunchtime discussion with graduate and undergraduate students about his latest novel, "The Dream of the Celt," which will be published in Spanish that month and in English next year.

The novel is inspired by historical figure Roger Casement, an Irish patriot who documented atrocities committed against natives working on rubber plantations in the Amazon and the Congo during the 19th century. Casement was "a fantastic character and a great fighter for human rights, before the concept existed," Vargas Llosa said.

In preparing to write the novel, Vargas Llosa first completed a great deal of research and created an outline, which is the approach he uses whenever he begins a work of fiction.

"The first draft is always very difficult -- a kind of fight against demoralization," he said. "I feel I'll never get over the difficulties. What I like most is rewriting. To correct, to suppress, to add, to rebuild the story -- this process is the most exciting for me."

When the novel is finished, he is gratified to have put in the difficult work to get there.

"It's so rewarding to produce this artificial life, which can enrich the life of others," he said.

**Images of the individual’s resistance, revolt and defeat…**

[John Ó Néill](http://sluggerotoole.com/profile/johnjoe/),

Thu 7 October 2010, 4:16pm

[4](http://sluggerotoole.com/2010/10/07/images-of-the-individuals-resistance-revolt-and-defeat/#comments)

Some odd resonances around the globe this week, from Peru to Palestine via Banna Strand. Today, Peruvian author Mario Vargas Llosa was [named as the recipient](http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/breaking/2010/1007/breaking24.html) of this year’s Nobel prize for literature. Vargas Llosa has travelled a pretty scenic route from supporting Fidel Castro, to an unsuccessful presidental campaign in 1990, a [Cervantes Prize](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cervantes_Prize) in 1995 and, latterly, a comfy chair among the Peruvian centre-right. In the announcement of the award, the committee cited his cartography of structures of power and his trenchant images of the individual’s resistance, revolt and defeat

His next novel, *El Sueño del Celta*, is due out, in its Spanish edition, in November (so I’m not even going to pretend to have read it). The title means ‘The Dream of the Celt’ and it is based on the life of Roger Casement. Casement’s campaigning took him into the Amazon where he highlighted abuses of the Putumayo Indians, following the previous work that earned him the nickname Congo Casement. Today, Casement’s work would probably have seen him in the mix for a peace prize, although in the 1900s it was pretty much an award for achievements in maintaining a balance of power and international diplomacy.

His campaigning isn’t a million miles away from what an Irish Nobel laureate has been at this week, although the Israelis, rather than taking a Nobel Peace Prize on her CV as suggesting she might be able to contribute something positive, have seen fit to [decide to deport Mairead Maguire instead](http://www.nobelwomensinitiative.org/home/article/israels-supreme-court-upholds-deportation-of-nobel-laureate-mairead-maguire). Surely another image of the individual’s resistance, revolt and defeat?

Well, probably not. Given that she was visiting Israel to highlight the work of Israeli and Palestinian women peace builders, does deporting her not seem more of an interesting comment on Israeli government attitudes to the cartography of structures of power, to coin a current phrase?

**Comments (4)**

1. *Rory Carr* says:

[7 October 2010 at 5:39 pm](http://sluggerotoole.com/2010/10/07/images-of-the-individuals-resistance-revolt-and-defeat/comment-page-1/#comment-643675)

I would suggest that Vargas Llosa’s move to the centre-right was equally as important as his literary output in winning him this award. It is equally true that his support for Castro would not have been unhelpful in making him an attractive candidate for the Lenin Komsomol Literary Prize, the Soviet “Nobel” back in the day, however, for whatever reasons (perhaps now apparent) he missed out on that award..

It is a rare bird indeed who has ever claimed both these prizes and the one noted who springs to mind also happened to be a former Chief-of-Staff of the I.R.A., Séan McBride, who was awarded the the Nobel Peace Prize in 1974 and the Lenin Peace Prize for 1975-76. Not for his stewardship of the I.R.A, alas, however commendable (or otherwise) you may have considered that to have been, but rather for his work as an international jurist, particularly in Africa which work included acting as UN Commissioner for Namibia and Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations. He also drafted the constitutions of the Organisation of African Unity and of the newly independent Afican nation of Ghana.

Indeed, as recipients of Nobel Awards, Ireland punches well above its weight – here’s the list:

1923 – for Literature William Butler Yeats

1925 – for Literature George Bernard Shaw

1951 – for Physics Ernest Thomas Sinton Walton \*

1969 – for Literature Samuel Beckett

1974 – for Peace Seán MacBride

1976 – for Peace Betty Williams

1976 – for Peace Mairead Corrigan

1995 – for Literature Seamus Heaney

1998 – for Peace David Trimble

1998 – for Peace John Hume

a bit top heavy on “peace” and “literature” some might argue (without much opposition admittedly) and the “peace” awards were and remain contentious but that’s par for the course with this award – remember Kissinger and Le Duc Tho in 1973, Sadat and Begin in 1978 and the grossly obvious political award to Lech Walesa in 1983 ?Top of FormBottom of Form

[*John Ó Néill*](http://indecentpeople.blogspot.com/) *(*[*profile*](http://sluggerotoole.com/profile/johnjoe/)*)* says:

[8 October 2010 at 9:52 am](http://sluggerotoole.com/2010/10/07/images-of-the-individuals-resistance-revolt-and-defeat/comment-page-1/#comment-644761)

You had to be under 33 to get a Lenin Komsomol Prize and Vargas Llosa was probably a relatively late bloomer in that respect. Even Pablo Neruda didn’t do the Nobel/Lenin double.

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*Alan Maskey* says:

[7 October 2010 at 6:46 pm](http://sluggerotoole.com/2010/10/07/images-of-the-individuals-resistance-revolt-and-defeat/comment-page-1/#comment-643787)

I was going to say this was political but then seeing Casement mentioned, had to back peddle because of my own politics. The Nobel Peace and Lit prizes are political awards. This is true of all the Irish except for Sir Walton and cricket player Beckett.McBride was a good stick and Yeats was a good poet but totally political.

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*Framer* says:

[9 October 2010 at 1:28 pm](http://sluggerotoole.com/2010/10/07/images-of-the-individuals-resistance-revolt-and-defeat/comment-page-1/#comment-647299)

John says Vargas’s “next novel, El Sueño del Celta, is due out, in its Spanish edition, in November…The title means ‘The Dream of the Celt’ and it is based on the life of Roger Casement.”

Mario Llosa Vargas was researching his book a year ago in Ballymena where Casement was schooled (at Ballymena Academy) and boarded in his holidays with the Young family at Galgorm Castle and in Ballycastle.

Rose Young a later Gaelic scholar had a degree of influence over him. She was one of a large number of female Protestant nationalists in the area from big houses. They like Casement were of the non-marrying sort.