**The Dream of the Celt by Mario Vargas Llosa – review**

Epic novel or biography on the grand scale? This pulls off both

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Roger Casement … doomed. Photograph: Hulton Archives/Getty Images

As a young boy, I was taken to see the [obelisk](http://www.geograph.ie/photo/257122) that stands on Banna Strand, Kerry. This monument marks the landing place from a German submarine on Good Friday 1916 of the Irish patriot Sir Roger Casement. In the runup to the Easter rising, seeking German help, Casement had been in Germany raising a battalion of Irish volunteers from prisoners of war. As well as Casement, the Germans sent 20,000 guns on a ship flying false Norwegian colours; they were never landed.

1. **The Dream of the Celt**
2. by Mario Vargas Llosa
3. 

Top of Form

I was fascinated by this story – which, like everything to do with Casement, is more complex than summary can allow. As I grew older and began writing, the disastrous tale of Casement's landing (he was soon apprehended with train tickets from Berlin and a German admiralty codebook in the pockets of his rough woollen coat) seemed a ripe subject for a novel. So, too, did his work exposing the rapacious practices of the Force Publique in the Belgian Congo and of rubber barons in the Peruvian Amazon. Other novelists, too, expressed an interest: I remember [Jim Crace](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/jim-crace) telling me he wanted to write a novel about Stanley, Conrad and Casement, who were all in the Congo at the same time.

The relations between Stanley (on whose expeditions Casement worked but whom he came to view, we are told, as "one of the most unscrupulous villains the west had excreted on to the continent of Africa") and Conrad ("You've deflowered me, Casement. About Leopold II, about the Congo Free State. Perhaps even about life") are just small side alleys in *The Dream of the Celt*, [Mario Vargas Llosa](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/mario-vargas-llosa)'s vast and intriguing novel about Casement.

Like a biography on the grand scale, it attempts to cover all episodes of his life, from his Protestant childhood in Ulster, to youth as a clerk for a Liverpool shipping line, to his early years in the Congo, working from 1884 for Stanley and on other extensions of the Belgian King Leopold II's barbaric project to annex the region, and on to his period as British consul, during which he began investigations into slave labour and other atrocities by the Belgian Force Publique. These were published in his Congo report of 1904. Commissioned by the Foreign Office as a response to increasing public outrage in Britain, it won Casement a knighthood.

Then, on, on, to Amazonia, for similar investigations into the company of Julio C Arana and the Putumayo rubber planters. This 1912 report, like its Congolese predecessor, is a foundational document of human rights. The final phase of Casement's life, as reported in *The Dream of the Celt*, concerns his global activities on behalf of the cause of Irish nationalism.

In some respects, Casement was one of the realists among Republican leaders (in part, he came to Ireland in 1916 to try to stop the rising, rightly believing it would not succeed without more German aid than he believed to be coming). In other ways, he was among the most romantic of them, as witnessed by his early poem "The Dream of the Celt", which gives Vargas Llosa his title; in other ways still, he was not romantic enough, failing to see the lasting symbolic power of martyred nationalists.

The deeper Casement got into Irish politics, the more rash he became, ignoring warnings that his sometime homosexual consort, Eivind Adler Christensen, had betrayed him to the British; probably Christensen was a British plant from the start.

Seduced by these old tricks, Casement probably would still have hanged even without the discovery of the so-called "Black Diaries", which appear to document his sexual activity ("Public bath. Stanley Weeks, athletic, young, 27. Enormous, very hard, 9 inches at least. Kisses, bites, penetration with a shout. Two pounds") over many years in different countries. Controversy still hovers over the diaries' veracity, but most now seem to accept the findings of a detailed forensic examination in 2002, which concluded that they are genuine. A British government decision to have Casement's anus and lower bowel examined after he was hanged, in order to establish his homosexuality, seems far more perverse than anything in the diaries.

With or without the hand of the British authorities, Casement was doomed. It seems there was something in him that wanted to be discovered. Vargas Llosa's interesting take on the diaries is that they are indeed part fictional, but that the fabrication was by Casement himself, as he documented fantasy encounters he had not dared to actualise (as well as ones he did).

At any rate, Casement's naivety is a key theme in this novel, and it dates from early in his professional life. On becoming British consul in Boma, Casement deeply regretted his involvement with Stanley and Leopold. As Vargas Llosa writes: "For the rest of his life, Roger lamented – he said it again now, in 1902, in his fever, dedicating his first eight years in Africa to working, like a pawn in a game of chess, on the building of the Congo Free State."

Some of the problems in *The Dream of the Celt* revolve around that moving "now". The narrative is framed (and also interspersed) with an account of Casement's imprisonment in Pentonville awaiting his appeal; that is the notional "now" of the book that disturbs or is disturbed by a series of competing episodic presents. A tighter temporal focus might have made for a novel that more easily assimilates such a bulk of material. Parts struggle to contain a proliferation of expository detail and qualifying reference.

There are a fair number of undramatised biographical passages, which make for bumpy reading, even if one takes a latitudinarian position about the role of information in novelistic prose. Once the reader is past these, however, this epic and often poetic novel delivers powerfully, giving a more rounded and authentic sense of one person's inner life and complexities than many biographies.

• Giles Foden's *Turbulence* is published by Faber.

**Web comment**

Casement was knighted in 1912 for his Peruvian investigation (again commissioned by the FO), receiving the CMG earlier for the Congo report.

Stanley Weeks was not 27 but 20 according to the terse 1911 diary entry in Barbados: "Out to Light House and saw a nice boy. Asked him to bath and he came on bone. Stanley Weeks 20. Stripped. Huge one – circumcised – swelled and hung 9'' quite and wanted it awfully – asked come at 11.30. 'Boniface' arr. and out at 12 and Stanley again and wanted it fearfully. His stiff and mine stiff. Then had to leave."

To a few people this entry is Casement fantasising which is an incorrect interpretation. Rather it is an opportunity set up and being missed - an entirely different proposition. This does not happen when he diaries nocturnal cruising where action is rarely frustrated, though sometimes abandoned.

The notion that the Norwegian "Eivind Adler Christensen, had betrayed him to the British and was probably a British plant from the start" is entirely fictional. Casement lied when he said they first met in New York. He had actually encountered him in a South American bar several years earlier as he noted. British diplomats were as surprised as anyone when he appeared out of the blue in Norway and later Philadelphia offering to sell Casement out. - JD