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**Rebel, Hero, Martyr**

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[*The Dream of the Celt*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0374143463?ie=UTF8&tag=thneyoreofbo-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0374143463)**
by Mario Vargas Llosa, translated from the Spanish by Edith Grossman
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 358 pp., $27.00



Roger Casement, circa 1904 [actually 1915]

[“*Kepler* remains, for me, among the great unmade movies. In saying this, of course, I am fully aware that the unmade ones, including my biopic of Roger Casement are always the great ones.” (John Banville, Irish Times, 8 June 2013.)]

Roger Casement was not only one of the greatest Irishmen who ever lived but also a considerable figure on the world stage. An Anglo-Irishman who flew the nets of his class and upbringing to devote himself to the cause of Irish independence from British rule, he was also, in his time, internationally recognized, indeed revered, as a champion of the oppressed indigenous peoples of West Africa and the Putumayo region of Peru, and as a tireless fighter for human rights in general. Why then is he largely forgotten, or ignored, in Ireland and elsewhere?

This is not an easy question to answer, for it has numerous strands. After the 1916 Rising in Dublin, which was to crack the foundations of the British Empire at the very time when Britain was mired in the horrors of World War I, Casement was stripped of his knighthood—although he had already renounced it—tried for treason, convicted, and hanged, despite the fact that he had come to Ireland from Germany on the eve of the Rising not to lead it, as the British believed, but, on the contrary, to try to persuade the rebel leaders to call it off, as he was convinced it could not succeed.

The Rising at first got little popular support—legend has it that at the start of the fighting on Easter Monday, Republican soldiers forcing their way into the General Post Office were set upon by respectable Dublin ladies who beat them with their umbrellas. But after the hasty court-martial and execution of fifteen of those leaders, public sentiment turned in favor of the seemingly failed rebellion. It was imperative, therefore, that Casement’s conviction and judicial execution be seen to have been entirely justified.

In pursuit of this goal, the contents of secret diaries he had kept in the Congo and in Peru, detailing promiscuous sexual activity with young native men, which had been discovered in Casement’s London flat after his arrest, were circulated widely among the clubs and pubs of London, causing general shock and outrage. For many years Irish republicans and others regarded the so-called Black Diaries as forgeries concocted by British intelligence to destroy Casement’s reputation and ensure there would be no commutation of the death sentence that had been passed on him. It has since been shown that the diaries were not forged, although that is not to say that what is contained in them is entirely factual.[1](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/oct/25/rebel-hero-martyr/?pagination=false&printpage=true#fn-1) These sordid matters, even when they were considered the result of mischief-making by perfidious Albion, cast a shadow over Casement’s memory among Irish nationalists and made them wary of admitting him into what the historian Tim Pat Coogan used drily to refer to as the “pantechnicon of Irish heroes,” while in the wider world, understandably, a man who had been hanged for treason by his own government in the midst of a world war seemed not the likeliest of paragons.

In *The Dream of the Celt*—the title is from a long, romantically patriotic poem by Casement—Mario Vargas Llosa has set out to recuperate Casement’s good name and restore him to an eminent place in history by way of a lightly fictionalized account of his life and work.

Roger Casement—“Roddie” to his family—was born in 1864 in the Dublin suburb of Sandycove, site of the Martello Tower where Joyce set the opening chapter of *Ulysses*. His father, also Roger, was a dashing figure who served in the Dragoon Guards in India and later turned up at Widdin, on the banks of the Danube, to offer his services to the cause of Hungarian independence, and was sent by Lajos Kossuth, the Hungarian leader, with a letter to the British prime minister, Lord Palmerston, pleading for support.[2](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/oct/25/rebel-hero-martyr/?pagination=false&printpage=true#fn-2) It is clear, then, where Casement *fils* acquired at least something of his taste for adventure and his romantic commitment to the cause of freedom.

Casement in later life claimed that there was not a drop of English blood in his veins, but this too was a romance. His father’s people originated on the Isle of Man and in the eighteenth century settled in County Antrim in the northeast corner of Ireland. They became landed gentry in the beautiful coastal area around Ballycastle and Ballymena; there were doctors and lawyers in the family, as well as Church of Ireland clergymen. Roger Casement was therefore a member of the Protestant Ascendancy, although the Casements were a minor if highly respectable branch of that already faltering class. His ancestors on the maternal side were originally English also, having come to Ireland from Leicestershire in the mid-seventeenth century. Casement’s mother, Anne née Jephson, was a Catholic convert who in turn secretly baptized Roger when he was three years old.

If Casement *père* was a somewhat remote figure emotionally, Anne Casement was a warm and loving presence in the lives of her four children, of whom the youngest was Roddie. However, when Roddie was nine his mother died, and a few years later Roger senior followed her, having ended his days in poverty. From these early losses Casement seems to have never quite recovered—as who would? Vargas Llosa gives sympathetic and mutedly lyrical accounts of the various stages of Casement’s childhood and youth. The novelist has an acute awareness of the gentleness of Casement’s nature, and of what might be called his practical-minded saintliness. Nevertheless his novel is by no means a hagiography, and acknowledges its hero’s naiveté and, where Ireland was concerned, his frequent and in the end fatal wrongheadedness.

Like most small boys young Roddie gloried in tales of adventure and derring-do. He “liked to become involved in the stories of great navigators, the Vikings, Portuguese, Englishmen, and Spaniards who had plowed the world’s seas,” and especially enjoyed his father’s stories of military life in “the jungles of India or [on] the crags and boulders of the Khyber Pass,” Vargas Llosa writes.

But it wasn’t feats of arms that most dazzled young Roger’s imagination, it was the journeys, the opening of paths through landscapes where white men had never walked, the physical prowess of enduring and conquering the obstacles of nature.

His special heroes were David Livingstone, the Scots doctor and evangelist who disappeared while searching for the source of the Nile, and the Welsh adventurer Henry Morton Stanley who, in 1872, famously “found” Dr. Livingstone and thereby achieved international fame. “When [Roger] grew up, he too would be an explorer like those titans, Livingstone and Stanley, who were expanding the frontiers of the West and living such extraordinary lives.”

Following their father’s death, the orphan Roddie and his sister and two older brothers were sent to live at Magherintemple House, the Casements’ ancestral home in County Antrim in Northern Ireland, under the care of their Great-Uncle John and Great-Aunt Charlotte. Roddie never felt at home in that austere household, but he loved the surrounding countryside and seashore, which he explored with his sister Nina, to whom he was very close, although she was eight years older. Casement always thought of himself as an Ulsterman, yet he was never as happy as he was in the summers he spent as a teenager in Liverpool with his maternal Aunt Grace and her husband Edward Bannister, who had traveled in Africa and now worked for the Elder Dempster shipping line that ran merchant and passengers ships between Britain and West Africa. This was the company that Roddie went to work for at the early age of fifteen.

It has been claimed of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England that it accumulated its empire by accident, absent-mindedly. In the popular imagination of Victorian England colonialism was regarded as first and foremost a mission to bring culture, Christianity, and restrained good manners to the barbarous peoples of what would later come to be called the third world. Commerce and profiteering, according to this complacent fantasy, were incidental to the civilizing task of Britain’s foreign venturings. Roger Casement in his youth subscribed fully to the image of the White Man in Africa bearing nobly and selflessly his philanthropic burden. It was a long time before he came at last to understand the true nature of the European exploit in the Dark Continent, and the implications of that exploit for the continent’s aboriginal peoples.

In the vanguard of the nineteenth-century scramble for Africa was Leopold II of Belgium, a wily and ruthless monarch who, under the guise of being a humanitarian crusader, maneuvered the Berlin Conference on West Africa of 1884–1885 into granting him the Republic of Congo, that vast and benighted treasure-house of natural resources, as his personal fiefdom, where he might, and did, pillage and plunder without supervision or hindrance. There were of course no African representatives at the Berlin Conference, yet it was decided that, as Angus Mitchell writes in a fine monograph on Casement, “humanitarian intentions would guide any imperial project.”[3](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/oct/25/rebel-hero-martyr/?pagination=false&printpage=true#fn-3)

The British delegate, Sir Edward Malet, declared that the project would be “dominated by a purely philanthropic idea,” while Bismarck, who had convened the conference, spoke of “noble efforts” to “render great services in the cause of humanity.” Not to be outdone, Leopold himself chimed in to promise “work of moral and material regeneration.” Some, perhaps many, of the statesmen who deliberated at Berlin may have believed in this pious claptrap, and certainly, as Mitchell notes, “many idealistic young men with a sense of adventure set out for Africa to try and realize those aims.” But before them went the tiger of nineteenth-century capitalism, red in tooth and claw.

Casement was one of those idealistic young men eager to join in the imperial adventure in Africa. In 1883 he signed on as purser aboard the SS *Bonny*, an Elder Dempster trade ship plying between Liverpool and Boma, near the mouth of the Congo River. He made three round-trips to Africa, and was so taken with the place that the following year he resigned his job and transferred to West Africa. What exactly it was he did in his first years there remains mysterious. Although he was an inveterate note-taker and diarist, he left scant record of those years, saying only that he had spent them “in varied employments” and denying he had ever been a trader as such. He must have been busy doing something, however, since Edmund D. Morel, the great campaigner for reform of the colonial system in Africa, could write of him that “he knows more about the Congo than any man living and is one of the finest men that God ever made.”

In the years after the Berlin Conference, Leopold’s agents hurriedly carried on the work of charting the Congo and opening it up to exploration, in order to gain access to the country’s vast mineral resources, in particular rubber, the “black gold” of the time. Already, between 1879 and 1881, a three-hundred-mile trade route had been opened from the mouth of the Congo river to the great alluvial lagoon that was to be named Stanley Pool. “Afterward,” writes Vargas Llosa, Casement discovered this was another of the farsighted operations of the king of the Belgians to create the infrastructure that would permit the territory to be exploited following the Berlin Conference….

This daring feat of exploration, it turned out, had been the work of Casement’s boyhood hero, H.M. Stanley, who for years had been Leopold’s chief agent in the Congo, a territory as big as Europe and one of the richest prizes in Africa. As Vargas Llosa writes, “‘And I,’ Roger Casement would often tell his friend Herbert Ward during his African years, as he was becoming aware of what the Congo Free State meant, ‘was one of his foot soldiers from the beginning.’”

In 1884, while the Berlin Conference was in progress, Casement went to work for the International Association, an intentionally vaguely named agency controlled directly by Leopold and his man Stanley. Two years later Casement joined the Sanford Expedition, another front organization for Leopold, charged with the task of surveying still-unexplored areas of the Free State and laying them bare to exploitation. Vargas Llosa writes:

For the rest of his life, Roger lamented…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, investing his time, health, effort, and idealism, and believing that in this way he was contributing to a philanthropic plan.

One of the most striking aspects of Casement’s story is the record it presents of a decent and simple-hearted man being transformed, by appalling circumstances, into a great moral figure, the weight and authority of whose voice would be heeded by governments, prime ministers, and presidents. As the scales fell from his eyes Casement began to recognize, or admit to himself, that Leopold’s African treasure-house was run on a regime of terror, the symbol of which was the *chicote*, a whip made of hippopotamus hide, “a vinelike cord able to produce more burning, blood, scars, and pain than any other scourge,” which Leopold’s overseers used upon the native rubber-gatherers with unremitting cruelty.

Casement must have had a catalog of atrocities to pass on to the young Polish adventurer Jósef Korzeniowski, whom he met and befriended in Matadi in 1890, when he had been more than five years in the African inferno. Later, when Korzeniowski had become Joseph Conrad, he retained an equivocal impression of Casement, describing him as “a limpid personality,”[4](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/oct/25/rebel-hero-martyr/?pagination=false&printpage=true#fn-4) but also as “a man, properly speaking, of no mind at all.” But if Conrad saw Casement as one of the “hollow men” who ran colonial Africa, like the demented Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, he was wrong. Casement admired the book and wrote to Conrad to tell him so; he knew, more thoroughly than its author did, the terrible reality on which the tale was based.

Casement’s reputation as a competent and diligent official had filtered back to London, and in the early 1890s the Foreign Office employed him in various parts of Africa, including the Congo. Again, the exact nature of his duties is unclear, though certainly he was “pursuing his slow quest of the Beast Leopold,” as one biographer puts it. Reports of atrocities had been filtering back to England. In April 1900 Casement wrote to the Foreign Office urging the British government to join with Germany “in putting an end to the veritable reign of terror which exists in the Congo.”

It was not until three years later, however, after questions on Leopold’s doings in Africa had been raised in the British House of Commons, that Casement was charged with gathering “authentic information” on the Congo. The report that he wrote, over eight days in a London hotel at the end of 1903, caused a public sensation, and a clamor for African reform. Famous figures such as Mark Twain and Arthur Conan Doyle joined in the protests, and Leopold was forced to commission a report of his own, much of which, on its publication in 1905, vindicated Casement, who in due course was knighted for his services in the Congo and, later, in South America. “As the British Empire reached its zenith at the dawn of the twentieth century,” Angus Mitchell writes, “it had given voice to a man who would prove to be its nemesis.”

Vargas Llosa weaves together his accounts of Casement’s African investigations and his dawning consciousness of himself as an Irish nationalist. He quotes a letter from Casement to his beloved cousin Gertrude Bannister, nicknamed Gee:

Dear Gee, it may seem like another symptom of madness to you, but this journey into the depths of the Congo has been useful in helping me discover my own country and understand her situation, her destiny, her reality. In these jungles I’ve found not only the true face of Leopold II. I’ve also found my true self: the incorrigible Irishman.

In 1910 Casement, heading a commission of half a dozen experts on the Amazon region, was sent by the British government to investigate the rubber trade in the Putumayo basin of Peru, where atrocities—murder, floggings, mutilations, rape—remarkably similar to those in the Congo had been reported in the press. The most shocking allegations were directed at the firm of Julio C. Arana, registered on the London Stock Market as the Peruvian Amazon Company. What Casement and his commission found in Peru exceeded even the most lurid newspaper stories. The Putumayo was another hell on earth, administered by an assortment of devils, the most terrible of whom was Armando Normand, “a loathsome monster,” as Casement called him, who ran the rubber-collecting station at Matanzas on the Cahuinari River. Normand, perpetrator of unspeakable cruelties, most of them devised for his own amusement, was living proof of the contention that there is no limit to the wickednesses a person will perpetrate if given absolute power over other human beings.

Casement’s Putumayo report was published in July 1912 and like the Congo report brought an immediate public response. “I have blown up the Devil’s Paradise in Peru,” Casement wrote to his cousin Gertrude. The *Times* of London devoted two columns and an editorial to the reports, and there were long articles in many other newspapers in England and abroad—there was even a sermon preached against Arana’s company in Westminster Abbey. In August the British House of Commons set up a select committee to investigate the affair; Casement was the chief witness, and gave powerful and persuasive evidence against Arana and his company. Much damage was done to the company as a result of public protests and the report of the select committee, but in the end international politics led to a fudge that allowed Arana to hold on to his power base. For all Casement’s efforts, the sufferings of the Indians of the Putumayo would continue.

While he was in Peru, Casement’s thoughts had returned again and again to Ireland. Vargas Llosa has him writing in his notebook at the time:

We should not permit colonization to castrate the spirit of the Irish as it has castrated the spirit of the Amazonian Indians. We must act now, once and for all, before it is too late and we turn into automatons.[5](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/oct/25/rebel-hero-martyr/?pagination=false&printpage=true#fn-5)

It seems clear that in his mind Casement made a direct and strong connection between the state of Ireland and the plight of the native peoples of the Congo and Putumayo—it may be, indeed, that he thought to sublimate the frustrations of his campaigns abroad by throwing himself wholeheartedly into the struggle for Irish independence. He became deeply involved with the Irish Volunteers, and raised funds for them among influential friends and supporters in Britain and America.

In 1914 he traveled to Germany with the aim of forming an Irish Brigade, composed of Irishmen in the British army who had been captured by the Germans. Casement’s hope was that the brigade would be transported to Ireland by the German navy to join in the fight against the British forces of occupation. However, when he made a recruitment attempt at the Limburg prisoner-of-war camp, the main body of Irish prisoners spat upon and jostled him. The German government offered instead 20,000 rifles, but declined Casement’s request that German officers be sent to Ireland to train the volunteers and make of them a dependable fighting force. After spending more than a year and a half in Germany, he returned to Ireland in a German U-boat and landed secretly at Banna Strand in County Kerry, where, in ill health and exhausted by the journey, he was captured and sent to London for trial. Found guilty of treason against the Crown, he was sentenced to death and, despite widespread pleas for clemency, was hanged at Pentonville Prison on August 3, 1916.

In his memoirs the hangman, John Ellis, wrote of Casement: “He appeared to me the bravest man it fell to my unhappy lot to execute.” Nevertheless Casement was subjected to one final humiliation before burial, when, on the orders of the British authorities, the doctor present at the execution explored the anus of Casement’s corpse in order to confirm “the practices to which the executed man apparently was devoted.”

*The Dream of the Celt* is, like its subject, stout-hearted, well-intentioned, tender, and somewhat naive. It is not in any real sense a novel, but is, rather, a biography overlaid with a light wash of novelistic speculation. It is an exoskeletal work, in that it wears its research on the outside. The author has read widely and diligently on his subject, but the material gathered, instead of being absorbed organically into the narrative, is presented to the reader in the form of raw data. The forays that Vargas Llosa makes into Casement’s thoughts and dreams, although warmly sympathetic, are less than inspired. The novelist has fallen in love with his subject, which is admirable, but his amatory approach does not help the novel.

Vargas Llosa would have done well to remember Henry James’s repeated injunction to himself in his notebooks: “Dramatize! Dramatize!” Yet Casement’s story is so absorbing, and the background against which it unfolds is so fascinating, that the reader will be swept along regardless of the novel’s flaws as a work of fiction. In *The Dream of the Celt*, for all its shortcomings, Mario Vargas Llosa has done an inestimable service to the memory of a great man.

1. Mario Vargas Llosa seems to regard the sexual adventures recorded in the diaries as for the most part fantastical, as romantic daydreams to aid in masturbation, or as wishful attempts at self-consolation. There is little doubt, however, that Casement was an active homosexual; whether he was criminally culpable in his exploitation of the boys and young man whom he paid to engage in sex with him is for the reader, and the historian, to decide. [↩](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/oct/25/rebel-hero-martyr/?pagination=false&printpage=true#fnr-1)
2. It is said that Kossuth had not even learned the name of the courier. Years later, however, in America, Kossuth was addressing a crowd from the steps of a train when another train passed by, from a window of which a hand appeared and presented him with a calling card. On it was printed the name “Mr Roger Casement,” and underneath was written in pencil: “I gave Palmerston the letter from Widdin.” A fuller version of this marvelous story is to be found in B.L. Reid’s *The Lives of Roger Casement* (Yale University Press, 1976), pp. 2–3. [↩](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/oct/25/rebel-hero-martyr/?pagination=false&printpage=true#fnr-2)
3. Angus Mitchell, *Casement* (London: Haus, 2003), p. 18. This is an excellent short survey not only of Casement the man but of the broad historical background to his life and work and tragic fate. [↩](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/oct/25/rebel-hero-martyr/?pagination=false&printpage=true#fnr-3)
4. Brian Inglis, *Roger Casement* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), p. 31. [↩](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/oct/25/rebel-hero-martyr/?pagination=false&printpage=true#fnr-4)
5. Since *The Dream of the Celt* is a work of fiction we are not sure if such passages are direct quotations from Casement’s surviving papers or novelistic inventions, though we may assume they are factual, given Vargas Llosa’s adherence throughout his narrative to the facts of Casement’s life. [↩](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/oct/25/rebel-hero-martyr/?pagination=false&printpage=true" \l "fnr-5" \o "Jump back to footnote fn-5 in the text)



Peter Marlow/Magnum Photos Mario Vargas Llosa, London, 2002