**Traitor, Martyr, Liberator**

**‘The Dream of the Celt,’ by Mario Vargas Llosa**

**By LIESL SCHILLINGER**

**New York Times**

**Published: June 22, 2012**

Joseph Conrad wasn’t the only literary European who traveled through the Congo basin during the 19th-century rush to harvest the region’s ivory, animal hides, minerals and especially its “black gold” — the liquid latex that welled in its rubber trees. While journeying by caravan to Léopoldville in 1890 to take charge of the merchant ship Le Roi des Belges, Conrad met Roger Casement, a handsome 25-year-old Irish do-­gooder who had lived and worked in the Congo Free State for the past few years. Like Conrad, Casement had come to Africa buoyed by the conviction that European colonization would bring moral and social progress to the continent and free its inhabitants “from slavery, paganism and other barbarities.” Each man would soon learn the gravity of his error.

Enlarge This Image



**Jamie Travezán and Morgana Vargas Llosa**

Mario Vargas Llosa

**THE DREAM OF THE CELT**

By Mario Vargas Llosa

Translated by Edith Grossman

358 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $27.

**Related:** [**Mario Vargas Llosa**](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/v/mario_vargas_llosa/index.html)

For Casement, the turning point may have been the sight of a Belgian officer of the Force Publique mercilessly whipping an unconscious Congolese boy with a *chicote*, a “vinelike cord” made of hippo hide, known for its ability to “produce more burning, blood, scars and pain than any other scourge.” Later, while traveling through Peru on assignment for the British government, Casement would come across men, women and children who had been branded, beaten, pilloried, mutilated and enslaved by rapacious employees of the rubber companies. Years later, both Conrad and Casement earned fame for their accounts of the atrocities they encountered; but while Conrad and his short novel “Heart of Darkness” would be remembered, Casement and his reports on human rights abuses in Congo and Amazonia would be all but forgotten, overshadowed by his ignominious end.

In his latest novel, “The Dream of the Celt,” the Peruvian author Mario Vargas Llosa unearths the achievements of this complicated man of conscience, reasserting his credentials as “one of the great anticolonial fighters and defenders of human rights and indigenous cultures of his time, and a sacrificed combatant for the emancipation of Ireland.” Although Casement was an Irishman (born in 1864 to a Protestant father and a Roman Catholic mother, and orphaned in childhood), he spent most of the first decade of the 20th century as a British consul, investigating working conditions on rubber plantations in Congo and Peru. His reports, which stirred public outrage, earned him a knighthood in 1911.

This honor notwithstanding, Casement’s loathing of colonialism gradually led him to see England as an enemy occupier and turned him into a fervent Irish nationalist. In 1914, in the early months of World War I, Casement traveled to Germany with his perfidious Norwegian lover (a man named Eivind Adler Christensen) to seek the kaiser’s help in arming the Irish against Britain. Upon his return to Ireland, in April 1916, he was captured, imprisoned, stripped of his knighthood and hanged as a traitor in Pentonville Prison in London. Casement’s fate was sealed not only by his collaboration with the enemy but by the release, to certain influential people, of lurid excerpts from his “black diaries” — books attributed to him that contained descriptions of various homosexual encounters, real and (perhaps, in Vargas Llosa’s view) imagined.

In 1916, in wartime, no clemency was possible for a man whose record bore the double blots of treason and homosexuality. In the 1930s, William Butler Yeats, whom Casement admired for his role in reviving Irish lore, history and tradition, wrote a poem in his defense (“What gave that roar of mockery, / That roar in the sea’s roar? / The ghost of Roger Casement / Is beating on the door”), but it wasn’t until the 1960s that Casement’s remains were taken from London to Dublin for a proper funeral. Now, nearly a century after Casement’s execution, Vargas Llosa has attempted to appease his uneasy ghost, assembling a case for his reprieve.

Vargas Llosa had been a published fiction writer for more than 50 years when this novel appeared in Spanish in November 2010. The previous month, the Swedish Academy had declared him the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, an honor that, in the opinion of many readers, was long overdue. But had this book appeared before October, it might have seemed that the Nobel category Vargas Llosa was courting wasn’t “Literature” but “Peace.”

“The Dream of the Celt,” felicitously and faithfully translated by Edith Grossman, feels anomalous when contrasted with the rest of Vargas Llosa’s vast, pliable oeuvre; it’s unusually straightforward and information-packed. The action is presented in long, chronological flashbacks, which Casement recalls from the prison where he awaits the hangman’s noose, shunned by most of his powerful friends. Organized by biographical milestones and itineraries, the novel encyclopedically recapitulates Casement’s observations of “indescribable cruelties” (though Vargas Llosa describes them quite effectively) on two continents, brought about by men “driven by greed and base instincts in a lawless world.” Only rarely does a flight of fancy enter the ledger, as when Casement and his companions notice the “variety, size and beauty” of the butterflies in the Peruvian Amazon, which “seemed to dazzle the air with delicate notes, a compensation for the moral ugliness they discovered at every turn, as if there were no end to wickedness, greed and pain in this unfortunate land.” Very occasionally, Casement is permitted a spicy reverie, as when he delights in the erotic vision of a muscular Angolan porter wearing a “light piece of cloth” around his hips that “opened and offered a glimpse of his sex.”

Vargas Llosa has two chief modes of writing: serious politico-historical novels like “The Feast of the Goat” and “The War of the End of the World” and sensual picaresques like “Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter” and “The Bad Girl.” The two modes often intertwine, each creeping lushly into the other: humor and wit leaven the more political novels, while acute social observations deepen the lighter ones. In this instance, however, Vargas Llosa’s revulsion at Casement’s accounts of the horrors to be found in Congo and Amazonia, as well as his respect for the consul’s role in exposing them, may have sapped his desire to take many liberties in reconceiving Casement’s personal history. How did Casement’s closeted yet (so it would seem) hotly pursued homosexuality shape his identity? Vargas Llosa doesn’t speculate, reserving most of his thoughts on the question for his epilogue, as if to deliberately avoid what he calls the “novelesque.” Instead, he restricts himself to underscoring the ever-present dangers of the abuse of power.

It’s easy to share Vargas Llosa’s enthusiasm for Casement as he retraces the man’s daring and difficult journeys through Africa and South America. But when he follows Casement on the third and final leg of his life’s voyage, traveling to Germany to woo the kaiser on behalf of Irish rebels, he loses his way — as, indeed, did Casement. It may be true, as Vargas Llosa writes, that in Congo Casement learned the “great lie of colonialism” and began to feel “like the citizen of a country occupied and exploited by the Empire that had bled and weakened Ireland.” And Casement’s charge that if the “methods of colonization in Europe are more refined,” they are “no less cruel” will find its supporters. It may not have been necessary, however, to defend all of Casement’s decisions in order to applaud his great and wrongly overlooked contribution to the quest for human dignity. A man doesn’t need to be heroic in everything he does in order to be a hero in his time.

**Liesl Schillinger is a regular contributor to the Book Review.**