***Roger Casement: Controversies in Script and Image***

**by Jeffrey Dudgeon**

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As the publicity for this presentation says, no Irish revolutionary and certainly no gay Irishman – Oscar Wilde excluded and that is a big exclusion – has had more books written about him than Roger Casement. And still they come, the latest being *Dream of the Celt* by the 2010 Nobel literature prize winner, Mario Vargas Llosa, which is not without its critics.

Indeed the two most prominent gay men of the 20th century were both Irish which may or may not tell you something.

Casement has also generated plays – radio and theatrical, TV films, several paintings, novels where he predominates, or features, and of course biographies, histories, academic articles, and news stories by the score, if not hundreds, but no movie of any length or significance. That I will address later.

Portraits are few. Sarah Purser’s two, are in the National Gallery (the yellow) and the red version in the office of the Seanad’s Cathaoirleach or Speaker which I used on the cover of my book. Other paintings and lithographs have mostly been hagiographic or quasi-religious imagery. The 1966 Irish half-century Easter Rising stamp had Casement at his most gloomy. (He also got a railway station named after him at Tralee). Photographs, almost an art work in some cases, have portrayed a more impressive Casement – tall, lean, ever bearded.

Sir William Rothenstein’s memorable picture of the two Indian boys, Ricudo and the younger, Omarino, that Casement brought back from the Peruvian Amazon in 1910, is the finest painting to emerge from the story, with a brightly coloured feather headdress, armlets and necklaces of jaguar teeth; and the boys self-confidence in their own ceremonial clothes. The boys’ story is a drama in itself as they were brought to the stately homes of England, just missing out on Pearse’s school St Enda’s, despite Casement’s efforts to enrol the younger, only to return to Iquitos desperate “to get back to the woods,” attempting and initially failing to get passage home on river boats as access was prohibited to Indians.

There are many photographs, ethnographic and erotic, whose provenance and survival is a story in itself, in NLI in particular, and related ones of the period in Belfast Central Library and the Ulster Museum. Why his cousin Gertrude Parry did not destroy those now in the NLI is a mystery as those of Europeanised youths tell a story. But they are now works of art, in their rarity and what they reveal of an era, be they spivvy males, swarthy boatmen, spotty waiters or lads in various states of undress. The ethnographic pictures are perfectly respectable and illustrate a dying Amazon culture.

There are only some thirty seconds of actual moving images of Casement, taken in Berlin in 1915. They were recently discovered in an archive in New Jersey and used (or most of the footage) in a Channel 4 documentary on the 1st World War. The Americans and probably Channel 4 did not know of their unique character.

The silent footage depicts Casement sitting at a desk addressing an envelope. The only sign of character is his trying to stuff the letter into the envelope and petulantly failing. This episode was probably that which he described on 3 May 1915: "I was ‘kined’ lately at the request of one of the U.S.A. war correspondents – a good fellow who wrote me up in an interview for Washington Herald and McClure's Syndicate, etc. etc. I expect the film is across now." And it was, but to remain unseen for nearly a century.

But how can you write a drama or a novel about someone who Joseph Conrad, author of *Heart of Darkness* (who had shared a cabin with Casement many years earlier in the Congo when he was an ivory trader and Conrad a river pilot) wrote of so harshly:

“He was a good companion but already in Africa I judged that he was a man, properly speaking, of no mind at all. I don't mean stupid. I mean that he was all emotion. By emotional force (Congo report, Putumayo – etc) he made his way, and sheer emotionalism has undone him. A creature of sheer temperament – a truly tragic personality, all but the greatness of which he had not a trace. Only vanity. But in the Congo it was not visible yet.”

This was in 1916, admittedly with hindsight. They are however few more devastating descriptions of another prominent human being.

It is suggested that Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* wrote a bit of Casement into Kurtz, or was it Marlow.

One critic, Anthony Bradley, wrote: “While Conrad’s diary and letters record his encounters with Casement, it would seem that *Heart of Darkness* does not contain a single character modelled to any great extent on Casement. Given Conrad’s artistic method, such an absence is not altogether surprising, and yet the novella is in some sense ghosted by Casement’s presence. Conrad’s letter to Cunninghame Graham (“He could tell you things”) suggests Casement’s spiritual affinity with Kurtz, as though he and Kurtz were possessed of some profound, shocking, and dark wisdom that had come out of the experience of imperialism, but remained unspeakable. Moreover, there is something of Casement’s ethical idealism in Marlow’s own evident moral superiority to the other Europeans in the Congo who, with the partial exception of Kurtz, are a low, rapacious crowd, interested only in ivory and maintaining their positions in the company.”

David Rudkin tried to depict him, and I believe succeeded in large part, in his memorable 1974 radio play *Cries of Casement as his Bones are Brought to Dublin.* This was less challenging for him than for others since Rudkin shared so much of Casement’s outlook and his orientation. The play was described by Lucy McDiarmid in the *Irish Art of Controversy* as “by far the best of the lot.” It is a rare theatrical production, outside of the court room or condemned cell, which captures Casement as human rather than heroic, although never as villain. It has been also performed in a theatrical form in England and perhaps should be revived here.

It is very much Rudkin’s testament. He is an Ulster-origined playwright and script writer who blossomed in the 1960s but has since gone seriously out of fashion. (He was fascinated by England’s Saxon history exampled by his TV play *Penda’s Fen* and by music, as in *Testimony,* a film he wrote about Shostakovich and Stalin).

Rudkin’s visit to last year’s Belfast Film Festival went unnoticed. I attended his master class and learnt much that I did not know, not least that his accent was still local even though he left Co Armagh at the age of eight (I thought he was English-born of Ulster parentage); that he described himself as homosexual which surprised me in my innocence – I knew he was married; that he scripted *December Bride*, and that he had a fiercely evangelical upbringing, one which carried through to east and central England whence the family migrated.

He had, he said of *Bones*, “a need to write a large piece that gave utterance to my Northern Irish Protestant identity as opposed to my English one; I am, for what the phrase means, half one, half other. This grew more pressing as Ulster lurched towards the brink of an inevitable sectarian war. Suddenly I realised that my Casement play and my Ulster play were the same thing”.

The work that emerged from this hybridisation was determined both in form and content by “the need to draw a parallel between the Irish crisis of Casement’s time and that of our own; the relevance of my, the author’s personal identification with the Irish journey Casement travels; most of all, the political need to present this Casement as my personal creation, formed from my own intuition and apprehension of him, with the various bits of evidence forensically presented.”

The play’s language was spectacularly rough, and broke every conceivable rule about respect for authority, deference toward clergy and sexual phrasings (e.g. *Bones* pp. 23-4 on the 1910 and 1911 diaries).

His modern character James Anderson was the possible future for the Ulster Protestants – imagined from England – after an unlikely blending of the communities, something which may be developing slightly now but certainly wasn’t in 1973 (see *Bones* pp. 76-8, on Casement’s advice to Anderson not to feel guilty about being a Prod).

Last year’s RTE radio play by Patrick Mason, *The Dreaming of Roger Casement*, which like Vargas Llosa’s novel portrayed him in his cell remembering/dreaming of his past sexual adventures, made a good fist of the story. The particular aspects I appreciated were those on Gertrude Parry, Casement’s heroic and ever-loyal cousin, and her response to seeing the diaries – a dramatic liberty with the truth but I suspect close to her understanding of a reality she always denied on the surface. She was to marry in 1916, shortly after the execution, one of Casement’s friends, Sidney Parry, on a promise of non-consummation – she was, effectively, emotionally married to her deceased cousin.

The Mason play was at its best when it portrayed the disputes within the British bureaucracy over Casement’s execution – the internal discussions amongst the Knights, Sir Basil Thomson of Scotland Yard, Sir F.E. Smith (Lord Birkenhead) and Sir Ernley Blackwell of the Home Office. The arguments were incisively written and witty. Smith, the prosecuting Attorney General and Carson’s Galloper, was given a broader dimension than usual, while the motive for the Home Office chief Blackwell's zealotry was left hanging. Small differences like these are easier to portray and more theatrically dramatic than a panoramic and sharply divided life.

Initially I was a little concerned that the production was going to be hackneyed with skylarks singing on Banna Strand etc but then it got into its stride. (Ciaran Hinds played Casement). The sexual portrayals were however somewhat old-fashioned and breathy.

Mick Heaney’s radio review in the *Irish Times* opined: “The narrative deftly shifted between the confabs of Casement’s silken-tongued establishment prosecutors and his own cell in the Tower of London, where he fatalistically recalled his humanitarian missions to Congo and Peru. It was a vividly imagined panorama, never more so than during the homoerotic dreams that feverishly envisioned Casement’s carnal exploits amid the cruelty he saw in Africa and South America, though these may have been a tad saucy for some.”

TV programmes have included Peter Wyngarde as Casement in *On Trial* (Granada 1960). Ironically Wyngarde who later played Jason King in the quirky detective series of that name fell foul in 1975 of the cottaging laws and his career nosedived. He like Casement was an inveterate cruiser.

The Welsh actor, documentary maker and controversialist, Kenneth Griffith (with films on Michael Collins and some others pro-Israel and Afrikaner) made a 1992 television programme on Casement in the BBC Timewatch series, majoring on the Congo episode. It was in a relentlessly hagiographic and anti-English mode. Griffith played the title role himself (and all others, some in consular head-dress), partly in the hall at Magherintemple in Ballycastle in front of photographs of British-uniformed Casements – not including Sir Roger – much to the annoyance of the current incumbent, Mrs Lesley Casement. It failed to grip.

My book, diaries aside, concentrated on only three parts: his family and background in Antrim, his early life mostly spent in England in genteel poverty – recently digitised newspaper reports of Roger and his brother Tom, being convicted of stealing in a London court reveal more of his dysfunctional childhood – and his Irish political life. I argued psychologically that his outlook was deeply shaped by being an ersatz Irishman brought up in England. His Ulster Protestant family back in Ballymena and Ballycastle provided a degree of financial assistance but wouldn’t go the extra mile and put the bright boy through university, rather obliging him to leave school at 16, and go to his uncle’s shipping world in Liverpool to make a living.

Mario Vargas Llosa won the Nobel Prize for Literature just months before he published his Casement novel. One hoped for something great, given there could be no more prestigious writer with a number of superb novels under his belt (e.g. ‘*Feast of the Goat*’ a chilling account of the assassination of Generalissimo Trujillo of the Dominican Republic) to take on the task of Casement. Not an easy subject, but made more difficult as his homosexual life was almost entirely out of sight and disconnected from his career and political work.

However he adopted the view of the continuing diary forgery theorists that the sexual passages in the Black Diaries, if even genuine, were largely a work of fantasy. This colours his whole novel and he therefore makes Casement out to be more a saint than anything else; someone riven with guilt about his activities and a sexual incompetent. Llosa has spoken of the diaries “with all their noxious obscenity.” Unquestionably his novel failed although it came to life briefly in its account of the effective work Casement did officially and unofficially to get the Peruvian rubber barons off the backs of the Amazindians.

Carol Taaffe in the *Dublin Review of Books* was canny enough to say the novel “reads like a tedious history primer...that it is a means of exculpating Casement for the diaries’ contents…It is an approach that hints – in a faintly postmodern fashion – at the unreliability of documents, the pitfalls of interpretation and the inherent falsity of historical narratives.”

Roy Foster, described as “the doyen of the Irish revisionist agenda,” said in his *Times* review that the novel was “wooden, creaky and unrelievedly dull.”

The *Irish Times* reviewer, Alison Ribeiro de Menezes, spotted that Llosa’s “reiteration of the heroic nationalist vision of the 1916 rebels was curious given the author’s strident criticism of nationalism in other writings.” (Llosa is actually a Peruvian, very much of the white Criollo caste and brought up in Bolivia by his mother and her family.)

My other reading of Llosa is that he is a straight guy, and one raised in the 1940s with a strong sense of his mother. Square even in 1960s terms. His family background is itself interesting and has occasional whiffs of Casement. He, if I am correct, transfers it to Casement who in the novel is for ever dreaming about his mother and suggesting that had she lived he would have gone on to a better job, and indeed a wife and family.

None of this seems to have concerned Casement in the slightest and of course was never going to happen if one believes, as I do, that sexual orientation for most gay men is set in perhaps the first four years of life and that an influential aspect to homosexuality is desynchronisation from standard surroundings. But that may be an unfashionable analysis.

Obviously Vargas Llosa felt a woman character was needed, and Casement’s mother, Anne Jephson, came to be used as a constant reminder of goodness, and as guilt-inducer. She in real life probably failed her children (if so, ably assisted by a feckless and over-opinionated father). Another women would have been a better choice like his cousin Gertrude Parry.

I know Llosa bought my book and listened intently to what I told him on our couple of days together in and around Co. Antrim but was aware he had already written much of the novel in his mind, if not on paper – before he read it or indeed saw me. His first and primary influence was someone, another Casement author, who sowed the seeds in his head that there was great doubt in Ireland about the authenticity of the diaries and perhaps, even if Casement wrote them, that he could never have lived them.

Colm Tóibín in the *London Review of Books* wrote: “Vargas Llosa’s efforts to evoke Casement’s childhood in Ireland are at the sugary end of historical novel writing. There are moments where it is hard not to feel that Jean Plaidy and Georgette Heyer had a hand in the book’s creation. [e.g.] The young Casement at Galgorm Castle ‘heard for the first time the epic battles of Irish mythology. The castle of black stone, with its fortified towers, coats of arms, chimneys, and cathedral-like façade, had been built in the 17th century by Alexander Colville, a theologian with an ill-favoured face – according to his portrait in the foyer – who, they said in Ballymena, had made a pact with the devil. On certain moonlit nights, a trembling Roger dared to search for him in passageways and empty rooms but never found him.’”

I have to say my heart sank when the novelist whom I was taking round Ballymena and the Glens, saw the Colville portrait and homed in on it at speed. We heard the story from the owner, who was showing us his decaying castle, of BBC NI filming an episode of their Ghost Busters programme there. I later heard that the mysterious sounds the Busters were investigating had been traced to a Ballymena taxi firm.

Vargas Llosa felt Casement did write the diaries saying, “But I believe that they belonged to a fantasy life, he imagined these happenings, but he didn’t live them. I see him as a lonely person, very gentle, too shy to have acted in such a brutal way”, asserting none the less, to a sceptic, “I don’t think that there is a possible doubt about Roger Casement’s homosexuality.”

And the novel suffers from that notion that Casement’s homosexual aspect was an unfortunate, even fantastical part of his life, one otherwise nearly flawless. A 1930s view.

I turn lastly to film. All known attempts to make cinema films or dramas of Casement’s life or about his activities, have been called off for various reasons usually involving pressure from one or other political establishment. Parties to these efforts to prevent even Hollywood from making such a film included Eamon de Valera, Sidney Parry and Lord Tyrrell, President of the British Board of Film Censors and formerly of the Foreign Office.

The other reasons for the paucity of movies are fairly obvious in that he can be portrayed in so many ways, and because he covered so much varied ground: he is martyr, diplomat, defector, patriot, poet, traitor, humanitarian, homosexual, pederast, some imply paedophile, victim, saint, Irish nationalist and adopted Ulsterman. In other words they would be too costly while the likely audience for a gay character might be judged small.

It is said that Neil Jordan has investigated the possibility while the film-maker Thaddeus O’Sullivan who made the moody adaption of Sam Hanna Bell’s novel *December Bride* reportedly said in 1994 (*Irish Art of Controversy*, Lucy McDiarmid p. 251) of a film he was contemplating: “It will involve intimacy, romance, and humour mixed with adventure, politics, violence and horror in the hope of constructing a modern film which will reclaim Roger Casement as a man out of his time, as an entirely modern hero.” He was apparently collaborating with John Banville[[1]](#footnote-1) on the project which again never came to fruition. Candidates suggested as highly suitable for casting as Casement, should a film or drama series ever be made, include Liam Neeson who was also educated in Ballymena, Daniel Day Lewis and even Colin Farrell. None the less TV films which were allowed to be made, seem to have signally failed to depict a three-dimensional person. All in all, it is in moving images and perhaps novels where a saint cannot be translated into art.

An early possibility of a film of the “life of this great Irish patriot” was mooted by Julius Klein of Universal Pictures in the early 1930s. He was, as he pointed out, a noted German-American, so in that sense would be a safe choice. When in Germany working as a journalist he became interested in Casement’s life. Klein felt so affectionately for his language that he initiated the first German language broadcasts in the United States. In time his affection for Germany was to wane and he took part in the Second World War, ultimately becoming a US Major General.

The story seemed ideal, containing many of the elements that would make a successful Hollywood movie: spying and secrecy, heroism in the face of insurmountable odds, a wartime setting replete with British and German officers, a trial scene and an execution. The only thing missing – because of celibacy or rampant homosexuality, depending on your point of view, was a classic love-interest, but one of these could easily be inserted. After all, as Klein was keen to emphasise, this was to be a work of fiction not a strict historical re-telling of Casement’s life.

This then was the offered Julius Klein treatment:

“The story opens with

1. A young boy sitting by the turf fire: he hears Irish songs sung to a harp, and a young Irish girl appears to him – Kathleen O Houlihan - She sings to him and tells him of the great deeds of his forebears.

2. A young lad at school in Ballymena is seated reading Irish History; His room is surrounded by pictures of the Irish Patriots who died for Ireland. He resolves to imitate them and so the imprecations of Kathleen follow him through his life.

3. As a young man he stays with his uncle who was British consul in the Congo from whom he hears speak of the foul treatment of the Congolese, the exploitation of the natives, the forced labour and the payment of taxes in rubber. His mind is impressed and his love for adventure.” (NLI MS 49,154/19)

The first two storyboards, corny as they may seem, were not far from the truth, except for the turf fire. This third section was marked “not accurate” by Gertrude Bannister, although why is not clear. Perhaps Roger and his uncle Edward Bannister never met, one or other always being abroad. There is indeed no trail of correspondence between them even though they followed in one another’s footsteps (and outlooks), barely a decade apart, around British consulates in both the Congo and Angola.

But the idea was not relished in Ireland. Ada McNeill wrote in July 1934 that Gertrude Parry was distressed at the proposal, adding, in a letter to Bulmer Hobson, “I think the idea of a film with some vulgar utter lie of a love interest and strong anti-English propaganda dragging in Roger and exciting more dirt-throwing is horrible. Forgive my thrusting my snout into it.” Gavan Duffy, Casement’s solicitor, added, “*Entre nous*” Sidney Parry got the project squashed. The Parrys’ success at stopping any film was matched only by their blocking in the 1920s of Peter Singleton-Gates’s publication of the diaries.

I rely here on James Moran’s ‘*Being Sir Rogered*: *George Bernard Shaw and the Irish rebel’* Belfast 2004, Cló Ollscoil na Banríona) and his Klein chapter as to how a dramatic representation on film was suppressed. It was reported in October 1934 that the British Film Censorship authorities “would not grant a certificate for the showing of the film in Britain, Universal Pictures saying the problem was “because a picture based on the life of a man who was hanged as a traitor to Britain could not be shown in that country.”

All sides concurred, although only the British censor spoke in public, but they all reveal the fears any filmic representation of Casement would pose. “On this occasion the British and Irish authorities, as well as George Bernard Shaw intervened, and ensured that Sir Roger’s dramatic representation would be problematic”.

This of course was in the era of the rumours put about by the London authorities in 1916 and the limited circulation mostly in the U.S. of diary page photographs. It was followed by forty years of official silence on the Black Diaries. They were only revealed to the public in 1959 after the Paris publication by Maurice Girodias of three of the four, taken from the Scotland Yard typescripts, surreptitiously obtained in the 1920s.

To this day, despite many attempts, Hollywood has yet to make its Casement film, something quite extraordinary considering the frequency of his appearances in other media.

Finally, I hope, as the centenary of Casement’s death approaches, I have guided QUB’s School of Creative Arts towards a number of openings they could consider for projects.

**Presentation trailer:** No Irish revolutionary and certainly no gay Irishman (Wilde excluded) has had more books written about him than Roger Casement. And still they come, the latest being *Dream of the Celt* by the 2010 Nobel literature prize winner, Mario Vargas Llosa, which is not without its critics. Educated in Ballymena and self-declared Ballycastle man, Casement has attracted the best writers and historians – Brian Inglis, Séamas O Síocháin, Roger Sawyer, Montgomery Hyde, and some less so. Five TV programmes have been made about his career although they tend to the tedious. None touched on his Ulster politics or his gay life, just the diaries, whose authenticity continues to be a subject of heated dispute. Portraits, by Sarah Purser, when alive, and mostly hagiographic since death, are rarer, while feature films suffered with his family and friends successfully objecting to any Hollywood biopic. There are only thirty seconds of actual moving images of Casement, in Berlin in 1915. Sometimes he turns up incognito, as in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* or Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World*. However David Rudkin’s *Cries of Casement as his Bones are Brought to Dublin* is a rare production, outside of the court room or condemned cell, that captures Casement as human rather than heroic.

**Writer’s biography:** Jeffrey Dudgeon MBE was the successful plaintiff at the European Court of Human Rights at Strasbourg in a six-year case whose 1981 judgment relating to the right to a private life led to the 1982 law decriminalising male homosexual behaviour in Northern Ireland. This was a European first and a precedent recently quoted in the US Supreme Court. The case started after his arrest in 1976 and the rounding-up that year of all the members of the two fledgling gay groups in Belfast. Jeff’s book on the life of Roger Casement and the authenticity of his famous diaries was published in 2002, entitled Roger Casement: The Black Diaries – With a Study of his Background, Sexuality, and Irish Political Life. It is a 650-page biography plus the diary transcriptions (including the never-before-published 1911 journal) and deals extensively with their authenticity. Casement, the gay Irish revolutionary, knighted British consul and human rights campaigner (Congo, Peru) was executed for treason in 1916. The controversy has not died down, as some still insist the diaries were forged. See the website <http://jeffdudgeon.com/> for more details and documentation.

1. “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.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)