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## Mario Vargas Llosa. *El Sueño del Celta.*

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In a letter to the historian Alice Stopford Green of 20 April 1906, Roger Casement summed up his life as he entered middle age:

It is a mistake for an Irishman to mix himself up with the English. He is bound to do one of two things-either to go to the wall (if he remains Irish) or to become an Englishman himself. You see I very nearly did become one once. At the Boer War time, I had been away from Ireland for years, out of touch with everything native to my heart and mind, trying hard to do my duty, and every fresh act of duty made me appreciably nearer the ideal of the Englishman. I had accepted Imperialism. British rule was to be accepted at all costs, because it was the best for everyone under the sun, and those who opposed that extension ought rightly to be 'smashed'. I was on the high road to being a regular Imperialist jingo--although at heart underneath all, and unsuspected almost by myself, I had remained an Irishman. Well, the [Boer] war gave me qualms at the end-- the concentration camps bigger ones--and finally, when up in those lonely Congo forests where I found Leopold, I found also myself, the incorrigible Irishman. [1]

Mario Vargas Llosa's fictionalized biography of this 'incorrigible Irishman' is a fairly hefty book, consisting of 455 pages. There are fifteen chapters, plus an epilogue. The chapters alternate as regards the scenes they depict. Odd numbers are set in Pentonville Prison London, as Casement in the summer of 1916 awaits the outcome of his appeal against the death sentence imposed for his role in attempting to import arms for use by Irish nationalist rebels. Even numbers are set in Casement's past. The Pentonville chapters also contain much material from Casement's earlier years, as there are many flashbacks, reminiscences and reflections, often prompted by the various people who come to visit Casement in his cell. Chapters one to seven are grouped under the title *El Congo*, eight to twelve *Amazonía*, thirteen to fifteen *Irlanda*. Of course there is no such clear demarcation in the individual chapters, as Casement's memories range and flow over the entire course of his life. Although it is written in the third person, *El Sueño del Celta* resembles a fictional autobiography. There is no point of view save that of the protagonist. Casement dominates every page. There is no scene depicted or dialogue created in which Casement is not present. We only know what Casement knows.

In an interesting interview Vargas Llosa gave to Angus Mitchell while he was still working on the book the author says:

I don't want to write a book of history which is disguised as a novel, not at all. I want to write a novel and so I'm going to use my imagination, my fantasy, much more than historical material. I love history but I am a novelist. I want to write a novel, a book in which fantasy and imagination are more important than the historical raw material... I know that I am not Irish so probably in my novel Irish people will find many things that they do not recognise, but I hope the novel overall will justify the inaccuracies. [2]

Because of his association with Antrim, Casement is sometimes erroneously seen as of the North of Ireland, but he was a Dubliner, born in the suburb of Sandycove, just to the south of Dun Laoghaire. According to Vargas Llosa, the event that most shaped Casement's childhood was the death of his mother when he was nine. The author writes poignantly and tenderly about the relationship between the boy Casement and his mother, Anne Jephson. Memories and dreams of his mother accompany Casement to the end. To take one of many examples, there is a chapter in which the jailer in Pentonville Prison talks to Casement about the loss of his son on the Western Front, and laments the fact that he had died without knowing women. Casement is only half listening.

Roger at least had known even for a short time the happiness of a beautiful woman, tender, delicate. He sighed. Unusually for him, he hadn't thought of her for a while. If there was a hereafter, if the souls of the dead followed from eternity the transient life of the living, he was sure that Anne Jephson had been observing him all the time, following his steps, suffering and worrying with each reverse he suffered in Germany, sharing his disappointments, and that terrible feeling of having made a mistake, of having idealized the Kaiser and the Germans, of having thought they would make the cause of Ireland their own and become loyal and enthusiastic allies of the dream of Irish independence (275). [3]

Almost four years after the loss of his mother, Casement's father also died. This did not leave an equal effect, as Casement never appears to have been close to his authoritarian father. (I suspect that Casement Senior was a somewhat more complex figure than may be visible from Vargas Llosa's description of him). The orphan Casement went to live with relatives in England. Vargas Llosa has him already espousing Irish nationalism at this time, though he does not return to Ireland when he finishes school. Instead, he went to Africa, a continent he was to reside in for some twenty years and which he came to consider home. Initially, he bought into the common currency of the day that justified the Scramble for Africa of the late nineteenth century, the White Man's ever deeper incursions into that continent. Indeed in the early years, Casement worked for the Belgian-sponsored International Association. He was primarily a surveyor, opening up land that had been unexplored by Europeans and reporting on the native population. Vargas Llosa expresses Casement's belief in the manifest destiny to 'civilize' Africa:

To take European products to Africa and bring back the raw materials which the soil of Africa produced was, more than a mere trading operation, an enterprise that favored the progress of people who were stalled in prehistory, given over to cannibalism and the slave trade. Trade brought with it religion, morality, law and the values of modern Europe, culture, freedom, democracy. It created progress which would culminate in converting the wretches of the African tribes into men and women of our time (26).

After a number of years Casement was appointed Consul by the British Foreign Office, to serve in present day Maputo, then Lourenço Marques in Mozambique. He seems to have made a very competent civil servant, a capable, hard-working, clever, and resourceful representative of the British government. Thereafter came the first great task of Casement's life, the investigation of the rubber-gathering operation run by the Belgians in the Congo. Vargas Llosa devotes many pages to bringing to life the cruel system operated by the Belgians. There are long descriptions of the terrorist methods that were used on the native population to force them to work bringing in food and rubber. Belgian-led paramilitaries murdered many Africans and mutilated more, cutting off hands or feet or genitals as punishment for minor or spurious transgressions. Vargas Llosa documents the beatings, floggings, imprisonments, torture and murder. At one stage Casement is addressed by a priest, a Father Hutot.

'Can you believe that things such as this happen in this world, Mr. Consul?' the priest said to Casement. 'Yes, *mon père*. I believe everything bad and terrible that I am told now. If I have learned anything in the Congo, it is that there is no more bloodthirsty beast than man' (97).

There are several Catholic priests in the book, Fr Hutot in Africa, Fr Urrutia in South America, Father Carey in Pentonville. Vargas Llosa's Casement has a lifelong semi-association with the Catholic Church. He had been secretly baptized a Catholic by his mother, and though he did not live as a Catholic, he certainly died one. For today's sensibility it is perhaps ironic that a practicing homosexual should have been (re)admitted into the Catholic Church, though the case of Oscar Wilde a couple of decades earlier offers a parallel.

Two years later the Foreign Office offered him the post of consul in Santos, Brazil, and subsequently in Rio de Janeiro. South America was to provide the scene for the second great act of Casement's life, when he was called on to investigate the conduct of another rubber company, in Amazonia, what is now part of modern Colombia. Casement's 1912 Putumayo Report exposed the exploitation of the indigenous population of the upper Amazon region. The book offers a long treatment of the systematic cruelties perpetrated by agents of Julio César Arana's Peruvian Amazon Company. It is during these years that Casement consciously or unconsciously formulates a unified theory of colonialism, a world view broad enough to include Congolese, South American Indians, and Irish farmers and fishermen. He could see that abuse and massacre was ever the way of the colonizer and imperialist: 'The Congo and Amazonia were united by an umbilical cord. The horrors were repeated, with few variations all inspired by greed, the original sin which accompanied man from birth, the secret fountain of infinite evil. Or was there something else to it? Maybe the devil had at last won the eternal battle?'

(158).

The epiphany extends to Ireland:

We Irish are like the Indians here in the Putamayo. Colonized, exploited and condemned to be so, as long as we place our trust in the institutions and governments of England to win our freedom. They'll never give it to us. Why would the Empire that colonizes us do anything for us unless it felt irresistible pressure to make them do it? That pressure can only come from armed force (239).

Casement's subsequent trajectory, his growing involvement with the militant wing of Irish nationalism, his trips to the United States and then Germany, are what constitute the third element in Vargas Llosa's book. They will be familiar ground for anyone versed in Irish history. Casement's fate takes him to attempt to organize an Irish Brigade formed from among the Irish members of the British Army imprisoned in Germany. They are blind and deaf to his exhortations. There was another side of Ireland; that of the vanquished, whom centuries of colonization had robbed of the indomitable spark that sent so many men and women to the barricades in Dublin' (366).

He organizes the importation to Ireland of substantial military supplies from Germany, and yet then goes to Ireland to try to prevent their use in what would be the Easter Rebellion. Ironically, it could be argued that Casement had not committed treason, for he came to Ireland to stop a rebellion, not to foment it. This distinction might have been of use in at least seeking to commute the death sentence. In the event, information on Casement's diaries was made public and the scandal accompanying their 'revelations' precluded any possibility of a reprieve, or more accurately became a further pretext for executing Casement.

There is no doubt that Vargas Llosa finds admirable elements in Casement's personality and in many of his actions. As he said in the interview with Angus Mitchell earlier mentioned, Casement 'seems to be a character whose natural environment is a very great novel and not the real world' Yet Vargas Llosa's Casement is a highly flawed figure. As the book moves towards its close, the emphasis is ever more on the Irishman's failures and mistakes and the contradictions of his life, expressed through the tortured self-recriminations of the protagonist. He was always very careful and meticulous with his paperwork—why did he become so careless towards the end? Having spent years planning for and advocating an Insurrection, why did he come to Ireland to stop one? Why had he had so little success in recruiting an Irish Brigade in Germany? Why did he accept a knighthood when he hated England? How come he was unable to make any progress in learning Irish, even though he had quickly gained proficiency in various African languages, as well as French and Portuguese? He had a German train ticket in his pocket when he was arrested in Kerry. Worse still, he had not destroyed a piece of paper which gave the code to communicate with the German War Department. How could he have been such a fool as to not take elementary steps to get rid of incriminating evidence?

Of course the greatest mistake was his association with the shadowy Norwegian Christensen, Lucifer, as Vargas Llosa has Casement call him, though in happier times he had been Casement's 'Viking God.'

Anyone who writes a biography of Casement, fictionalized or otherwise, must confront the issue of Casement's sexuality and especially the matter of the Black Diaries. The very first scene of the book shows a clerk employed by Casement's attorney berating Casement: 'How could you have been so stupid, you idiot? How could you put such things on paper, *hombre de Dios*. And why did you not destroy those diaries before starting to conspire against the British Empire?'(15).

In some instances, Vargas Llosa has Casement distancing himself, changing the subject when the Diaries are mentioned, or claiming not to know what people are talking about. He thanks Fr Casey for not asking about 'those filthy things which, apparently, they are saying about me'. He tells the priest that he will not heed the English Cardinal Bourne's outrageous request that, before he becomes a Catholic, he should repent of all those 'vile things the press is accusing me of'(396). But we also see Casement reminiscing – alone in his prison cell – about his first homosexual awakenings, how Africa had freed him of the constraints of Victorian society. He remembers a boy he went fishing with in Boma—'Shutting his eyes, he tried to resurrect that scene of so many years ago: the surprise, the indescribable excitement' (282).

Little by little, over the course of the novel, we see Casement picking up more and more young men. There are erotically-charged encounters which do not lead to sex, such as when Casement asks a young man in Amazonia to let him take his photograph:

Roger took various shots, to the laughter and jeering of the other young men. He made the youth take off the paper hat, lift his arms, show his muscles and assume the pose of a discus thrower. For this last pose he had to touch the young man's arm for a second. He felt his hands soaked from nerves and the heat. He only stopped taking photographs when he saw that he was surrounded by ragged urchins who were gazing at him as if he were a strange insect. He thrust the coins towards the young man and quickly returned to the consulate (159).

In many cases he fights his compulsions, feeling disgust after an encounter and embarking on long periods of abstinence.

Often this is symbolized by the urge to take a bath. He reaches a nadir when he has sex with a beggar he picks up on a Paris street, and takes home a case of genital lice. But worst for him by far is what follows from picking up the Norwegian Christensen, the British spy whom Casement met in New York in 1914. In a real way Casement's sexual proclivity helps to bring about his death. Vargas Llosa as author appears to accept that the Black Diaries were written by Casement, but believes that he did not do all that is described in them. Some of the incidents were imagined or fantasized, what might be called a personalized pornography. "He had been weak and succumbed to the flesh on many occasions". Not as many as were described in his diaries and note-books, although of course to write about what one has not experienced, but what one wanted to experience, was also a way of living it, however cowardly and timidly' (375).

At the end of the novel, Dr Percy Mander, the doctor who witnessed the execution, authorizes Casement's burial only after he has meticulously examined the dead man's anus. With a white rubber glove, he probes it to satisfy himself that it is dilated, thus 'confirming' that the dead man had indulged in the 'practices' which were described in the Black Diaries. This final touch--historically true--epitomizes human degradation, but it is the degradation of the British prison and its agent Mander.

Some critics have seen in *El Sueño del Celta* another of Vargas Llosa's well-known attacks on what he calls nationalism. For example, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech he said the following:

I despise every form of nationalism, a provincial ideology – or rather, religion – that is short-sighted, exclusive, that cuts off the intellectual horizon and hides in its bosom ethnic and racist prejudices, for it transforms into a supreme value, a moral and ontological privilege, the fortuitous circumstance of one's birthplace. Along with religion, nationalism has been the cause of the worst slaughters in history, like those in the two world wars and the current bloodletting in the Middle East. Nothing has contributed as much as nationalism to Latin America's having been Balkanized and stained with blood in senseless battles and disputes, squandering astronomical resources to purchase weapons instead of building schools, libraries, and hospitals.[4]

Yet it is surely impossible to see this book as a critique of nationalism, or of Irish nationalism at any rate. In fact, Vargas Llosa's treatment of Irish nationalism is benevolent, mostly focusing on the cultural nationalism that gained so much ground during Casement's lifetime. Irish nationalism, as Vargas Llosa associates it, means attending a *Feis* in the Glens of Antrim, or trying to understand those old men and women who in Casement's time still spoke the North Antrim dialect of Irish. It is a rural idyll--there is no consciousness of the city, of Dublin or Belfast.

On several occasions Roger felt his eyes becoming moist as he listened to the joyful melodies of the bagpipers and choirs, or, as he heard, even without understanding a word, the story-tellers recounting the ancient Gaelic romances and legends, born in the medieval night (143).

The contradiction is apparent rather than real, for in the same Nobel Prize acceptance discourse Vargas Llosa went on to say:

We should not confuse a blinkered nationalism and its rejection of the 'other', always the seed of violence, with patriotism, a salutary, generous feeling of love for the land where we were born, where our ancestors lived, where our first dreams were forged, a familiar landscape of geographies, loved ones, and events that are transformed into signposts of memory and defenses against solitude. Homeland is not flags, anthems, or apodictic speeches about emblematic heroes, but a handful of places and people that populate our memories and tinge them with melancholy, the warm sensation that no matter where we are, there is a home for us to return to.

Casement was certainly an advanced nationalist, but he lacked the true spirit of a revolutionary. Someone like James Connolly, or Tom Clarke, would not have sought to stop the Rising, and would never have insisted that the volunteers of the Irish Brigade not be sent to Ireland. It was rather pointless to hope to supply 20,000 guns to the Volunteers and then tell them not to use them. That quantity of arms could have challenged the British presence in Ireland had it found its way north to Liam Mellows' Volunteer battalion which had mobilized in Galway. Indeed a few years later General Tom Barry's Third West Cork Brigade fought the British to a standstill even though they were armed with just a few score rifles. Vargas Llosa has Casement questioning his role in these events:

Had he made yet another mistake with his life? What might have happened if the arms on board the *Aud* had got into the hands of the volunteers who waited at Tralee Bay? He imagined hundreds of patriots on bicycles, cars, horse-drawn carts, even donkeys, silently moving under the stars and distributing the arms throughout Ireland (366).

Vargas Llosa's title comes from that of a long epic poem which Casement had written 'in September 1906'. With the publication of *El Sueño del Celta* and its inevitable translation to other languages, Casement will be introduced to a whole generation who know little of him. Indeed, one can foresee Hollywood taking an interest in the cinematic possibilities of the extraordinary pageant of Casement's life. Vargas Llosa's Casement may be far more vivid than is the figure of the many

scholarly biographies which already exist. While this is a good thing, popularized history or fictionalized biography brings with it its own risks. Often a creative depiction of persons or events tends to become canonical. It is not uncommon to meet Irish people, the young especially, whose vision of Eamon De Valera is based entirely on the sinister pantomime villain depicted in the movie *Michael Collins*. Just recently, Robert Redford's treatment of Mary Surratt in his movie *The Conspirator* seems likely to establish her heroic status with those who know little else about the Lincoln assassination. Casement is such a multifaceted personality that even Vargas Llosa's sympathetic and wide-ranging portrait remains only one man's interpretation.

The author has done an impressive job of immersing himself in the diverse milieu of the Congo, Amazonia and Irish nationalism, and put admirable effort into researching his book. In his acknowledgements, he lists the countries in which he carried out research: The Congo, Peru, Amazonia (where Colombia, Peru and Brazil come together), Ireland, the United States, Belgium, Britain, Germany and Spain. But his expectation, that 'probably in my novel Irish people will find many things that they do not recognise' is quite unfounded. At times he calls the north of Ireland *Irlanda del Norte*, a term which only came into use years after Casement's death. And he has Casement celebrating the 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Clontarf in 1914, 'in which the Irish under the leadership of Brian Boru defeated the English'. (The reality is that Clontarf was an Irish victory over the Vikings, though there were Irish and Vikings on both sides.) He surely exaggerates the degree to which Ireland forgot Casement. Only one of many figures in the Irish nationalist pantheon, yet Casement has given his names to the country's only military airport, to a large football stadium and several football clubs, as well as appearing on an Irish stamp in the 1960s. And there was of course the state funeral in Dublin of whatever remained of Casement on that sleety morning in the spring of 1965.[5] One wonders if Vargas Llosa was aware of another Irishman whose trajectory also combined Irish nationalism with international humanitarianism—Richard Madden. Both worked in both Latin America and Africa, though in a different sequence, and there are many parallels between the two. Of course Madden lived to be an old man and died peacefully.[6]

Perhaps a flaw in the book is that it fails to yield a rounded portrait of Casement. There is much detail about him, but a lot is omitted. We do not get a multi-dimensional vision of Casement the man. Much of his personality remains unseen. He was by all historical accounts somewhat irascible and dogmatic, yet Vargas Llosa's Casement shows nothing of that. It is perhaps a limitation of the authorial technique used. Because of the narrative point of view, focused strictly on Casement, readers do not get to see him as others saw him, especially his friends and collaborators. Not everyone was impressed with him, even among those who shared his politics. Some did not trust him. In fact Casement was always an outsider, especially in his own country. He actually spent only a small part of his life in Ireland--it would be interesting to calculate how few years this amounted to. And the author falls short in explaining the cause and origin of why his Casement is so vehemently anti-British. British Imperialism has only an ephemeral presence in the novel. The wrongs it perpetrated are not listed in the kind of detail devoted to Belgian colonialism, and would in any case by Casement's time bear no comparison with them. Hence, Casement's actions might appear unreasonable and excessive to readers of the novel who are unfamiliar with Irish history. It is of course impossible to criticize the author for ahistoricity, since Vargas Llosa repeatedly asserts that this is a novel, not a biography. The parameter is set as early as the first chapter, as the long scene in which Casement is told of the appearance of the Black Diaries has no historical substance that I am aware of. There are other cases, such as Vargas Llosa's depiction of the role of Catholic priests in Casement's work in the Congo--most of Casement's contacts were actually with humanitarian Anglican clergymen.

Born in a land far from Ireland, Vargas Llosa only heard of Casement when well into middle age, and yet was inspired to know more, to honor Casement and to bring him before the readers of the world. It is in Kerry, where the last tragic act of Casement's life began, that Vargas Llosa ends his book.

In McKenna's Fort there is a small monument [7] in Irish, English and German, a column of black stone, marking the spot where he was arrested by the RIC. And on Banna Strand, the beach where he arrived, there is a small obelisk bearing the images of Casement and Captain Robert Monteith. The morning I went to see it was covered with the white droppings of the screaming seagulls that circled above, and on all sides you could see the wild violets which so moved him the morning that he returned to Ireland to be captured, tried and hanged (451)

[1] Cited in Margaret O'Callaghan 'Casement, Colonialism and A Remembered Past' in David George Boyce *Ireland in Transition, 1867-1921*, (London: Routledge, 2004), p.162.

[2] Angus Mitchell, 'An Interview with Mario Vargas Llosa', *Irish Migration Studies In Latin America* 7, 2, 137-144 (July 2009).

[3] All translations from the Spanish text are by the reviewer.

[4] [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2010/vargas\\_llosa-lecture\\_en.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2010/vargas_llosa-lecture_en.html). Accessed 5 July 2011.

[5] It is striking that one of the men who accompanied Casement on his last voyage, Daniel Bailey, very likely a British agent, died in Canada in 1968, and hence was still alive on the day that Casement was reburied.

[6] See Gera Burton, 'Liberty's Call: Richard Robert Madden's Voice in the Anti-Slavery Movement (1833-1842)' in *Irish Migration Studies in Latin America* 5:3 (November 2007), pp. 199-206, and José Antonio Quintana García, 'Madden and the Abolition of Slavery in Cuba' in *Irish Migration Studies in Latin America* 7:1 (March 2009), pp.81-84.

[7] A picture of the novelist at the Casement monument heads Mitchell's interview with Vargas Llosa mentioned above.

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