

In the Name of this Land/Em nome desta Terra: *Documenting Roger Casement's presence in the Putumayo*

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Abstract: *In the Name of this Land/Em Nome desta Terra is a feature documentary film that explores the atrocities committed by rubber barons against the enslaved Indians in Colombia and on the Putumayo River district. Such atrocities were reported in 1910 by the British diplomat Roger Casement, an obstinate human rights defender, in the Amazon and in Africa, who was sentenced to death in 1916 after fighting for the independence of Ireland. In April 2019, in La Chorrera, where the Peruvian Amazon Company was stationed, along 10 days the production crew filmed the lives of the Uitotos, Boras, Ocainas and Muinanes Indians, the four surviving peoples of what is now known as the “indigenous holocaust”.*

Keywords: *Roger Casement; Putumayo; Amazon; Rubber; Documentary film.*

Resumo: *Em nome desta Terra é um filme documentário longa-metragem sobre as atrocidades cometidas pelos barões da borracha contra os índios escravizados na região do Rio Putumayo e da Colômbia. Tais atrocidades foram registradas em 1910 pelo diplomata britânico Roger Casement, obstinado defensor dos direitos humanos tanto na Amazônia como na África, e condenado à morte em 1916 por lutar pela independência da Irlanda. No mês abril de 2019, em La Chorrera, lugar em que ficava situada a sede da Peruvian Amazon Company, a equipe de produção filmou durante 10 dias o cotidiano dos índios Uitotos, Boras, Ocainas e Muinanes, os quatros povos sobreviventes daquilo que hoje é conhecido como “holocausto indígena”.*

Palavras-chave: *Roger Casement; Putumayo; Amazonia; Borracha; Documentário.*

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The documentary film *In the Name of this Land* is based on the *Diário da Amazonia de Roger Casement* (2016), the Portuguese translation of *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement* (1997). It is an extraordinary account, which describes a chapter of the rubber boom in South America along with the life of Roger Casement (1864-1916), a diplomat, humanist and Irish revolutionary who, at the time of his journey to the Amazon, was employed as British Consul-General in Rio de Janeiro.

The rubber cycle in the Amazon has still not been fully explored by Brazilian historiography, even though rubber represented 45% of the national economy in the early

twentieth century. It was an important historical moment of abundance, which allowed the rise of new fortunes benefitting Brazilians, Peruvians and Colombians. The main purpose of Casement's mission, which is present on every page of the *Amazon Journal*, was to rescue the voice of the indigenous peoples and confer international visibility to their cry for injustice. At present, Roger Casement is treated as an Irish hero, yet for the indigenous peoples of the Putumayo, he is practically a myth.

The latex sap tapped from the rubber tree (*hevea brasiliensis*) was the commodity which boosted the advance of the modern world and that, literally, made it move faster. Much has been written about this cycle of wealth, although it is often under a perspective which highlights the exotic, as if it were merely an illustration of a postcard. But it was precisely the story of Roger Casement that unveiled what was in fact taking place in the depths of the Amazon jungle in connection with the London Stock Market, and in the daily lives of the indigenous peoples who worked to extract this valuable resource. Even to this day, Casement's *Amazon Journal* challenges us to ponder upon contemporary issues, such as biodiversity, ethnic diversity, silviculture, extractive economy, environmental protection, genocide and natural rights to the indigenous inhabitants of the Amazon forest.

At the time of the investigation on which *In the Name of this Land* is based, the extractive production of rubber lay at the heart of the Brazilian and Peruvian economy, and to complicate things further the Peruvian Amazon Company was registered in London. Thus, in order to provide a full account of the true state of affairs, in addition to keeping his diary, Casement made use of a camera, which provided ocular proof of the events that he witnessed during his five-month stay in the Brazilian, Peruvian and Colombian Amazon.

The aim of the investigation was to confirm the truth of the accusations that had reverberated in the European and North American media, which revealed hideous facts concerning slave labour and the extermination of indigenous populations in the Amazon region. These complaints fell chiefly upon the Peruvian Amazon Company, whose partners were subjects of the British Crown as well as the Peruvian businessman Julio Cesar Arana, a powerful rubber baron who kept residence in the cities of Manaus, Iquitos and London, and who owned an empire greater than England along the borders of Brazil, Peru and Colombia.

Despite its historical importance, the *Amazon Journal* was forgotten for many decades. Only in the early 1990s did the historian Angus Mitchell bring it to light, at least to eyes of scholars and researchers. In 2010, influenced by Mitchell's work, the Nobel Prize Laureate, Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa, published his biographical novel *The Dream of the Celt*, about Roger Casement. In March 2016, year of the centenary of Casement's execution, a Portuguese translation of Mitchell's *Amazon Journal* was published by Laura Izarra and Mariana Bolfarine. In 2014, filmmaker Aurelio Michiles, was awarded a grant to travel to Ireland in order to know more about who Roger Casement was, from up close. This trip laid the foundations to the film *In the Name of this Land*, currently in the making. Between the months of April and May 2019, the crew shot in La Crorrera, Letícia (Colômbia), Tabatinga and the Anavilhanas archipelago in Manaus. In August, film shooting resumed at Estúdio Quanta, in Sao Paulo.

In the light of the revealing entries in *The Amazon Journal*, the documentary *In the Name of this Land* is a journey into the intimate life of Roger Casement, a plunge into the depths of his soul, but at the same time it is a metaphor for the utopian disillusion of El Dorado transformed into a tropical hell.

Throughout the investigation, Casement can be perceived as a privileged and keen observer of nature, of society and of the diverse human types he meets. His report holds powerful criticism against the excesses practiced by rubber traders who, at the time, represented

47% of the Brazilian economy. These hideous facts were known, but withheld; nevertheless, Roger Casement does not reframe from denouncing them: between 1900 and 1911, to produce 4,000 tons of rubber, 30,000 Indians were killed!

Perhaps, the courage to denounce the atrocities was part of his pioneering history of fighting for Human Rights. At the turn of the century, in 1903, he had already defended peoples who were also rubber collectors subjected to atrocious conditions put in practice by employees of the Belgian Congo Free State, in Africa.

A conflict that the documentary explores is the dilemma lived by Casement during the course of his journey, as he begins to question his identity. It becomes clear to him how unjust and destructive empires are. At the same time that Casement is an employee on the pay of the British Crown, he feels deeply Irish, and begins to ponder upon whether his native Ireland was not as subjugated by the British Empire as the indigenous Amazon peoples were exploited by rubber traders.

This and other quandaries lead him to many discoveries. His appraisals are often critical, disconcerting and up to date, not only for us Brazilians, but also for other South American countries still dealing with the aftermath of these tragic incidents related to human rights, especially regarding indigenous peoples.

Keeping in mind the narrative of the *Amazon Journal*, we can affirm that that this five-month trip to the limits of the Amazon region changed Casement's way of thinking and conceiving the world, and it led to a radical change in the struggle for the independence of Ireland, which took shape as the 1916 Easter Rebellion, in Dublin. Casement's involvement with the Rebellion was the main reason why he was condemned to death for high treason to the British crown. Today, Roger Casement is considered a hero in the Republic of Ireland, but in La Chorrera, among the descendants of the surviving Uitotos, Boras, Ocainas and Muinanes Indians, his defence of the indigenous peoples is celebrated almost like a myth.

For a better dynamism of language to describe this "documentary journey", we have shot fictional scenes with extras and with Roger Casement being played by the actor Dori Carvalho. The use of this resource is intended to "humanize" Casement in the public eye.

In addition to these scenes, there are recordings of interviews given by the Amazonian writer Milton Hatoum, the historian Angus Mitchell and several indigenous individuals who now live in La Chorrera, the main centre of atrocities committed by the Peruvian Amazon Company. These statements not only address the *Amazon Journal*, but also clarify and update issues related to the life and the historical importance of Roger Casement, the geopolitics of the rubber economy, or discuss issues related to human rights and the defence of cultural and civilizing diversity.

These terrible events are still reported by the Uitotos, Boras, Ocainas and Muninanes peoples who keep alive the dark memories lived by their ancestors. Their testimonies were recorded in La Chorrera, Colombia. Depicting the amazing story of Roger Casement is not simply an invitation to look back at past facts, but rather it is an opportunity for viewers to become aware of issues that permeate society in order to challenge it, to create ruptures and hold it responsible.

The world of today is undergoing a series of crises, the severity and size of which threaten the many achievements reached by men, especially during the 20th century. Among these achievements is the consolidation of human rights, a cause for which Roger Casement fought throughout his life. It is essential to remember that for a large number of people around the world, the current struggles for human rights and the right of peoples to self-determination are paramount demands.

Fortunately, despite the fact that indigenous peoples remain under threats of all kinds, we can say that this monstrous history has been transformed by the indigenous people of La Chorrera into another narrative. Instead of being immersed in tears, they are struggling for the right to move forward with respect for their cultural past. By the same token, they also insist on compensation for the genocide suffered by their ancestors during the rubber cycle.

Hence, the Uitotos, Boras, Ocainas, Muinanes have managed to transform the “*Casa Arana/ Arana House*”, a space of sadness, where their ancestors were imprisoned and tortured, into the “*Casa do Conhecimento/ House of Knowledge*”, an Indigenous College where peoples from Colombia, Peru and Brazil join to value and learn about their traditional knowledge, the importance of human rights and the environment.

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