

*From the Putumayo to Connemara: Roger Casement's Amazon Voyage of Discovery*¹

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Abstract: This article examines the evidence provided by Roger Casement's accounts of his voyage to the Putumayo in the Amazon rain forest in 1910, in order to reveal the Odyssean complexity of his personality and to suggest that, in a metaphorical sense at least, this journey represented the beginnings of an Irish homecoming for Casement, just as the wanderings of Homer's hero led him to the recovery of his house and kingdom in Ithaca.

Roger Casement's hanging as a traitor at Pentonville prison, London, on 3 August, 1916, placed him amongst the most prominent martyrs of the Irish nationalist cause. Yet, just five years previously, he had received a knighthood from the British government for his investigations into the methods of white rubber traders in the Peruvian jungle. The dichotomy in his character represented by these two moments has been charted as a life-long series of ambivalences and paradoxes in Roger Sawyer's biography *Casement: The Flawed Hero* (1984), and was judged to be of paramount significance by the prosecution in his trial for treason. A compulsive journal-writer, Casement was to find his diaries used at the time of his trial in order to sully his reputation and to ensure that he was denied the chance of a reprieve. To this day, opinion continues to be divided between those who believe that his "Black" diaries are a genuine, albeit clandestine, account of his homosexual activities, written at a time when such activities were a prisonable offence, and those who claim that they were the calumnious work of the British Secret Service.² The controversy which began at time of the trial was not settled by the publication of extracts from the diaries in 1959, and it was shown to be still very much alive in 1997. In that year Angus Mitchell published *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement*, introducing the text of the "White" diary for 1910 with a lengthy commentary in which he sets forth the arguments justifying his conviction that the "Black" diary is a forgery. In the very same year Roger Sawyer published *Roger Casement's Diaries – 1910: The Black and the White*, referring to much the same evidence

as that utilised by Angus Mitchell in order to draw the opposite conclusion and attest to his certainty that the diary is genuine.

Finding myself more swayed by Roger Sawyer's line of argument, I shall work from the premise that the "Black" diary is genuine and, as such, reflects aspects of Casement's complex personality. It is my intention, therefore, to examine the text of both the diaries covering the period of Casement's 1910 journey to the Putumayo in order to demonstrate that the months spent in the South American rain forest represent a crucial stage in the process of Casement's recognition of his Irishness and may therefore be seen as a form of homecoming. Some 3000 years previously, one of the very first works of European literature had also been concerned with a homecoming. In *The Odyssey*, Homer depicts his eponymous hero as a man of exceptional courage, eloquence, endurance, resourcefulness and wisdom. But he also shows him to be a wily master of disguise and deceit, prepared to be lashed as a beggar in order to enter Troy unseen,³ able, with Athena's aid, to approach the palace of King Alcinöös unnoticed by the citizens of Scheria,⁴ and, of course, capable of concealing his identity from his own wife Penelope and her suitors when he returns to Ithaca. According to Virgil's *Aeneid*, it was Ulysses who gave the order for the Trojan Horse to be built, which has provided an abiding metaphor for undercover action, so much so that it has even been incorporated into the nomenclature of computing as a term for a program designed to breach the security of a computer system while ostensibly performing an innocuous function. It therefore seems appropriate to describe Casement's voyage to the Putumayo as an odyssey, for it combines the elements of the heroic, the homecoming and the duplicitous in equal measure.

There is much in Roger Casement's background that serves to explain the ambivalence that characterised his life. Born on 1 September, 1864, in Kingstown, later to change its name to Dun Laoghaire, his parents embodied the schism that bedevils Ireland to the present. His father was descended from an Ulster family of landed gentry of that particularly Puritanical strain known as "Black Protestants," while his mother was a Jephson, a well-established Roman Catholic family. In the course of genealogical research that he himself undertook, Casement was to discover that the Jephsons were, in fact, derived from a Protestant family, two of whose members had been charged with treason at the time of King James II's Catholic parliament in 1688 and had lost their estates, although not their lives, for having joined forces with the Prince of Orange. Despite the fact that Casement's mother died when he was only nine, and was therefore to affect his life more through her absence than her presence, she took one action which, by its very subterfuge, made a significant contribution towards her son's ambivalence. Whilst on holiday without her husband in Rhyl in North Wales, in a ceremony of the utmost secrecy, she had her three-year-old son baptised as a Catholic. Casement affirmed himself to be a Protestant throughout his life but he was to return to the church of the majority of his countrymen shortly before his execution, being received into the Catholic church *in articulo mortis* and receiving his first Catholic Holy Communion shortly before he was hanged. As Roger Sawyer points out, "in a remarkable number of ways

Casement was Ireland in microcosm.⁵ He argues that, “particularly when seen in terms of familial, religious and political influences, and even, though less obviously, on a physical level, throughout much of his life there appears an interesting parallel between his own divided loyalties and those of his nation.”⁶ Indeed, Casement’s life can be interpreted as the progressive resolution of his divided loyalties, so that his last-minute “conversion” to the Catholic church may be seen as all of a piece with the magnificent speech he had made on the final day of his trial just over a month previously, in which he had spoken eloquently of his loyalty to Ireland and of the ineligibility of the English court to try him.

Following in a family tradition Roger Casement was a compulsive traveller. In 1883 he became ship’s purser on the SS *Bonny*, which traded with West Africa and, by the time he was twenty, when he went out to work in the Congo, he had already made three trips to Africa. Roger Sawyer suggests that his work “was to lead to a life-long belief in the virtue of travel as a means to improving relations between peoples.”⁷ After eight years of varied activities in Africa he obtained his first official British Government position, in the Survey Department in the Oil Rivers Protectorate, later to become Nigeria. Three years later, in 1895, he obtained his first consular posting, to Lorenzo Marques in Portuguese East Africa, and was to remain in Foreign Office service until his resignation at the end of June 1913. During his eighteen years of consular service Roger Casement went on to serve the British Government in Portuguese West Africa, South Africa, the Congo State, Portugal and Brazil – where he occupied consular positions in Santos, Pará (now known as Belém), and finally rose to the post of Consul-General in the then capital, Rio de Janeiro. Although he was periodically frustrated by the limitations imposed by the Foreign Office upon the Consular Service, always seen as a poor relation of the Diplomatic Service, Casement suffered no conflict of loyalty provoked by his Irish nationality and his duty to his British employer. For the most part, his Irish identity manifested itself in such matters as adherence to “buy-Irish” campaigns when equipping himself for his many expeditions, with the result that he was able to offer Irish Whiskey to ailing indians in the middle of the Amazon jungle,⁸ as well as trying somewhat ineffectually to protect himself from a tropical storm with “a Dublin ‘brolley’.”⁹ It was as a result of his experience and competence, particularly as demonstrated in his investigation of the enslavement and torture of native rubber-gatherers in the Congo in 1903, that he was called upon, in 1910, to accompany the commission investigating the alleged atrocities of the British-owned Peruvian Amazon Company, which collected rubber in the region of the River Putumayo.

The territory in question is an area of some 12,000 square miles which is largely confined to a triangle formed by the Putumayo and two of its tributaries, the Cara-Paraná and the Caquetá (known in Brazil as the Japura). The easternmost point of this triangle lies some 400 miles up the Putumayo from that river’s confluence with the Amazon. It is the Putumayo which now delimits the frontier between Peru and Colombia. This region of tropical rain forest was inhabited by native tribes of indians who were

coerced into harvesting the local second-grade of rubber known as “sernambi,” whose commercial value depended on the virtually free labour of the gatherers. The system had been set up by Julio Cesar Arana at the turn of the century and in 1907 he took advantage of the rubber speculation on the London stock market to set up a limited company with a capital of G1,000,000. (The 12,000 square miles of forest that he had acquired by 1906 had cost him a total of G116,700.) The first English-language news of the atrocities practised by the Peruvian Amazon Company was published in the magazine *Truth* in September 1909 and it was these accounts by the American railway engineer Walter Hardenburg, who had been held prisoner by the company, which prompted the British Foreign Office to request that Casement accompany the investigating commission sent to Peru by the London board of directors the following year.

Thus it was, then, that Wednesday, 21 September, 1910, found Roger Casement on board the *Liberal*, steaming very fast up the River Igara-Paraná, one week after leaving Iquitos, and almost exactly two months after setting sail from Southampton on the *Edinburgh Castle*. The “White Diary,” which records his findings in harrowing detail, covers the period from 23 September to 6 December, when he left Iquitos again, this time on his way downstream to Manaus and thence to Europe. The parallel “Black Diary,” which includes details of Casement’s sexual encounters, covers almost the whole of 1910, from 13 January to 31 December. Those in search of prurient titillation will almost certainly be disappointed with the content of the “Black Diary,” whose sexual information is largely limited to reports of penis sizes and shapes and accounts of associated financial transactions. Given that Casement’s homosexual preferences no longer arouse the horror expressed by his contemporaries, the diary is far more interesting for the light that it sheds upon the thought processes that are set down in its companion volume. According to Angus Mitchell, “Casement’s 1911 Amazon voyage has been rather briefly passed over by biographers as little more than a sexual odyssey – an officially sanctioned cruise along the harbour-fronts of Amazonia.’¹⁰ In fact, even the “Black Diary” makes it clear that, during the period of the investigation itself, Casement not only refrained from sexual activity himself but urged that his companions should do the same.

This is not to say that he did not conceive of his journey as an odyssey. On 6 October, just two weeks into the investigation, but at a time when Casement had had ample opportunity to observe the harems of Indian women enjoyed by the Peruvian Amazon Company’s slavemasters, Casement warned his three Barbadian witnesses that “there must be no tampering with the morals of the Indian girls,” since this might subsequently invalidate their testimony. He goes on to say that he had been “talking of the dangers of sleeping *en garçon* in these halls of Circe!”¹¹ It is not unreasonable, then, to argue that Casement cast himself in the role of Odysseus, protecting his men from the wiles of Circe and her four handmaidens. Since Circe refers to Odysseus as “the man who is never at a loss... never at fault... never baffled,”¹² we may perhaps gain a notion of the way in which Casement saw himself on this journey, a notion which he himself

confirms when, towards the end of the investigation, he writes that the employees of the Peruvian Amazon Company had come to look upon him as “a sort of Enquirer Extraordinary, who has got to the bottom of things.”¹³

Within the period of the investigation itself both diaries give us some insight into the Puritan standpoint from which Casement viewed the decadence and horror in this heart of darkness. A much-quoted and, in my opinion, much-misinterpreted passage from both diaries is that for 4 October, when Casement observed three serving boys involved in a homosexual frolic in a hammock at nine o’clock in the morning. It has been argued that the comment in the “Black Diary” for that day, “A fine beastly morality for a Christian Coy,”¹⁴ is evidence of the supposed forger of the diary making a mistake and forgetting the homosexual character that he was “creating” for Casement. However, a reading of the “White Diary” for the same day reveals that Casement was not shocked by what the three boys were doing in the hammock so much as by when they were doing it, at a time when they should have been working. This is consistent with his repeated observations of the hypocrisy of the slavemasters at the various rubber-collecting colonies that he visited, who did no work themselves, whilst utilising the most barbaric forms of torture to extract superhuman effort from their indian slaves. In this sense, the Protestant work ethic that was instilled into him in his youth is clearly informing his revulsion, which is directed in equal measure at the Peruvian villains, whose barbarity he uncovers, and at the so-called civilisation of the English company and its shareholders, whose complacent complicity underpins and authorises the whole corrupt system.

As Casement’s journey progresses, we find him setting Ireland against England as a point of reference, its purity contrasted with the rotten workings of the Imperial system into which he is plunging, as can be seen in this central passage:

But this thing I find here is slavery without law, where the slavers are personally cowardly ruffians, jail-birds, and there is no Authority within 1200 miles... And, yet, here are two kindly Englishmen not defending it – that I will not say – but seeking to excuse it to some extent, and actually unable to see its full enormity or to understand its atrocious meaning.... The world I am beginning to think – that is the white man’s world – is made up of two categories of men – compromisers and – Irishmen. I might add and Blackmen. Thank God that I am an Irishman...¹⁵

Although he does not go as far as to equate the situation of his oppressed countrymen with that of the tortured indians that he is investigating there are a number of indications that he perceives a parallel between the two. Thus, for example, when he visits the “Nation” of Meretas indians, whom he greets with his customary present of cigarettes, he is struck by the word that they use to express their gratitude, “Bigara.” To his ear this is strongly reminiscent of the Irish “begorrah,” so he writes that he christened his hosts “the Begorrahs.”¹⁶ A couple of weeks later, when he comes across a rubber-carrying party of indians from the Andokes and Boras tribes, all of whom have been

badly flogged, he describes the wounds suffered by “one big splendid-looking Boras young man – with a broad good-humoured face like an Irishman...”¹⁷ His revulsion at what he sees is such that he states that he “would dearly love to arm [the indians], to train them, and drill them to defend themselves against these ruffians,”¹⁸ going on to reiterate his readiness, which almost serves as a leitmotif in the diaries, to hang many of the Company’s staff, if necessary with his own hands.

It is no surprise that Casement was to find that the nightmarish images of this expedition had been seared indelibly into his mind and, almost three years later, as Roger Sawyer records, “he witnessed physical resemblances to the Putumayo in Connemara, where starvation and squalor caused an outbreak of typhus.”¹⁹ The fate of the indians he had seen in Peru and that of the Irish peasants seemed to him to be so similar that he described the region as the “Irish Putumayo” and wrote that “The “white Indians” of Ireland are heavier on my heart than all the Indians of the rest of the earth.”²⁰ (Seventy-five years later, in Roddy Doyle’s *The Commitments*, Jimmy Rabbite was to echo this idea, with his affirmation that “The Irish are the niggers of Europe... An’ Dubliners are the niggers of Ireland... An’ the northside Dubliners are the niggers o’ Dublin.”²¹)

On 15 October, 1914, just over a year after he had described the typhus-stricken Connemara peasants as “white Indians,” Roger Casement and his treacherous manservant Adler Christensen set sail for Norway on the *Oskar II*, en route for Germany and the ill-conceived, ill-fated attempt to enlist support for the Irish independence struggle from amongst Irish prisoners-of-war who had been captured by the German army. In April 1916 he was to return to Ireland with a token member of his Irish Brigade and a donation from the Germans of 20,000 elderly Russian rifles²² and 50 rounds of ammunition for each gun, all lost when the *Aud* was scuttled in Tralee Bay.²³ As his Amazon diaries suggest, Roger Casement’s German excursion was not the result of an inexplicable, schizophrenic personality shift – from loyal British diplomat to treacherous Irish rebel. It is better seen as the logical end-product of a long and gradual process in which his investigations of slavery in the African and South American jungles enabled him to understand the extent to which Irish enthrallment to the English was actually not so different from that of peoples in the more distant parts of the Empire, and that armed rebellion might be the only path to freedom. Although his treachery, as defined by an Act drawn up in 1351, resulted in the death of no British subjects, he nonetheless paid for it with his own life.

At the time of Casement’s arrest in 1916, Julio Cesar Arana, the man whose greed had caused the suffering and death of thousands of indians at the hands of the British-owned Peruvian Amazon Company, was living a life of luxurious impunity in Peru. To ensure that the irony of the situation was not lost on Casement, Arana sent him a long telegram in his prison cell, urging the erstwhile investigator of his company to recant. History does not record Casement’s reaction but, if there is any justice to be

found in this story, it may derive from the fact that Casement's name, like that of Odysseus, has acquired heroic status, whereas that of Arana is destined to oblivion.



Casement 1 – “Putumayo Indians wearing bark costumes and masks, one of the few surviving photographs taken by Casement during his 1910 journey (courtesy National Museum of Ireland and National Library of Ireland)”



Casement 2 – “Putumayo Indian rubber-gatherers chained and imprisoned in the stocks (from W.E. Hardenburg, ‘The Putumayo: The Devil’s Paradise – Travels in the Peruvian Amazon Region and an Account of the Atrocities Committed Upon the Indians Therein’, ed. C. R. Enock, London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1912.)”

Notes

- 1 This article, with some modifications, was first presented in the form of a paper at “IASIL 2001 – Odysseys” at Dublin City University, under the title of “The Wily Hero: Roger Casement’s Amazon Odyssey.”
- 2 Although Roger Casement has not generated quite so much attention of late as Michael Collins, it is certain that Neil Jordan’s forthcoming film, scripted by John Banville, will rekindle the controversy surrounding his life and death.
- 3 Homer, *The Odyssey*, W.H.D. Rouse (trans.), (New York: New American Library, 1937), p. 49
- 4 Homer, *The Odyssey*, p. 81
- 5 Roger Sawyer, *Casement: The Flawed Hero*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 1
- 6 Sawyer, *Casement*, p. xi
- 7 Sawyer, *Casement*, p. 21
- 8 Roger Casement, “White Diary,” 22 October 1910, *Roger Casement’s Diaries – 1910: The Black & the White*, Roger Sawyer (ed.), (London: Pimlico, 1997), p. 204
- 9 Casement, “White Diary,” 17 October 1910, p. 183
- 10 Angus Mitchell, “The Diaries Controversy,” in Roger Casement, *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement*, Angus Mitchell (ed.), (London: Anaconda, 1997), p. 35

- 11 Casement, "White Diary," 6 October 1910, p. 153
- 12 Homer, *The Odyssey*, pp. 119-22
- 13 Casement, "White Diary," 18 November 1910, p. 238
- 14 Casement, "Black Diary," 4 October 1910, *Roger Casement's Diaries – 1910: The Black & the White*, Roger Sawyer (ed.), (London: Pimlico, 1997), p. 91
- 15 Casement, "White Diary," 6 October 1910, pp. 159-60
- 16 Casement, "White Diary," 9 October 1910, p. 169
- 17 Casement, "White Diary," 21 October 1910, p. 195
- 18 Casement, "White Diary," 25 October 1910, p. 213
- 19 Sawyer, *Casement*, p. 92
- 20 These comments were jotted down by Casement on a letter, dated 6 June 1913, which had been sent to him by Charles Roberts, the chairman of the Select Committee on the Putumayo. (National Library of Ireland, Casement (Misc.) Papers, NLI 13073.)
- 21 Roddy Doyle, *The Commitments* (1988), in *The Barrytown Trilogy*, (London: Minerva, 1993), p. 13
- 22 At Casement's trial, Colonel Nicolai Belaiew, of the Imperial Guard, identified the rifles as having been manufactured in Russia in 1905. See Peter Singleton-Gates and Maurice Girodias, *The Black Diaries*, (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 477
- 23 It is interesting to note that Roddy Doyle's fictional account of the Easter Rising refers to the loss of the *Aud*, but makes no mention of Casement as being responsible for the shipment of arms. See Roddy Doyle, *A Star Called Henry*, (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 110.

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