Texture of Experience

I (Lucia) went to see the obelisk that stands on Banna Strand, Kerry. This monument marks the landing place from a German submarine on Good Friday 1916 of the Irish patriot Sir Roger Casement. In the runup to the Easter rising, seeking German help, Casement had been in Germany raising a battalion of Irish volunteers from prisoners of war. As well as Casement, the Germans sent 20,000 guns on a ship flying false Norwegian colours; they were never landed.

I had heard of Sir Roger Casement as a martyr to the Irish cause and fight for freedom. I did not know anything else about him. I love to read book reviews and came across the book ‘The Dream of the Celt’ written no less by Mario Vargas Llosa. This was another layer of interest. Why would a Peruvian Nobel Prize Recipient write about an Irish freedom fighter (so to speak). And then I understood. Sir Roger Casement exposed the rapacious practices of the Force Publique in the Belgian Congo and of rubber barons in the Peruvian Amazon.

Like a biography on the grand scale, it attempts to cover all episodes of his life, from his Protestant childhood in Ulster, to youth as a clerk for a Liverpool shipping line, to his early years in the Congo, working from 1884 for Stanley, in the Congo and on other extensions of the Belgian King Leopold II's barbaric project to annex the region, and on to his period as British consul, during which he began investigations into slave labour and other atrocities by the Belgian Force Publique. These were published in his Congo report of 1904. Commissioned by the Foreign Office as a response to increasing public outrage in Britain, it won Casement a knighthood.

Then, on, on, to Amazonia, for similar investigations into the company of Julio C Arana and the Putumayo rubber planters. This 1912 report, like its Congolese predecessor, is a foundational document of human rights. The final phase of Casement's life, as reported in The Dream of the Celt, concerns his global activities on behalf of the cause of Irish nationalism.

In some respects, Casement was one of the realists among Republican leaders (in part, he came to Ireland in 1916 to try to stop the rising, rightly believing it would not succeed without more German aid than he believed to be coming). In other ways, he was among the most romantic of them, as witnessed by his early poem "The Dream of the Celt", which gives Vargas Llosa his title; in other ways still, he was not romantic enough, failing to see the lasting symbolic power of martyred nationalists.

The deeper Casement got into Irish politics, the more rash he became, ignoring warnings that his sometime homosexual consort, Eivind Adler Christensen, had betrayed him to the British; probably Christensen was a British plant from the start.

Seduced by these old tricks, Casement probably would still have hanged even without the discovery of the so-called "Black Diaries", which appear to document his sexual activity over many years in different countries. Controversy still hovers over the diaries' veracity, but most now seem

to accept the findings of a detailed forensic examination in 2002, which concluded that they are genuine.

With or without the hand of the British authorities, Casement was doomed. It seems there was something in him that wanted to be discovered. Casement's naivety is a key theme in this novel, and it dates from early in his professional life. On becoming British consul in Boma, Casement deeply regretted his involvement with Stanley and Leopold. As Vargas Llosa writes: "For the rest of his life, Roger lamented – he said it again now, in 1902, in his fever, dedicating his first eight years in Africa to working, like a pawn in a game of chess, on the building of the Congo Free State."

The narrative is framed with an account of Casement's imprisonment in Pentonville awaiting his appeal; the novel moves back and forth from the ‘current’ imprisonment to what lead to that imprisonment.

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