

'More power to the Indians': Roger Casement, the Putumayo, and indigenous rights

Séamas Ó Stocháin*

Abstract: *Marking the centenary of Roger Casement's humanitarian investigations in the Putumayo region of the Upper Amazon, this article suggests that he not only recognized the abuses there as systemic but increasingly saw them as part of the wider features of exploitation which accompanied colonization and empire. His Putumayo work illustrated a long-term commitment on his part to what we would term today indigenous rights.*

Key Words: *Casement, Putumayo, Empire, Race, Indigenous Rights*

Casement in the Putumayo, 1910

On 22 September 1910, a little over one-hundred years ago, Roger Casement arrived at La Chorrera, the local headquarters of the Peruvian Amazon Company (PAC) on the River Igaraparaná in the Putumayo region of the Upper Amazon, to investigate allegations of atrocities perpetrated by PAC employees in connection with the collecting of wild rubber.¹ The main victims were the indigenous people of the area, used as a workforce by the company. Casement was representing the British Government and accompanying a company commission of investigation, also sent out from London. British involvement derived from two facts: that the PAC was registered in London and that many of its employees in the Putumayo came from the island of Barbados, a British colony.²

From then until he departed the area on 16 November, he carried out intensive interviews of Barbadian employees, visited other rubber stations, observed his surroundings closely, and reflected and wrote constantly. He acquired the detailed knowledge of what he needed to know about Barbadian involvement in the Putumayo and about the rubber system itself. The year 1911 was spent writing reports on the investigation (to become part of the official Blue Book), campaigning about the Putumayo, and in a second visit to Peru in the autumn in an attempt to add momentum to the campaign.

Early in 1912, Randall Davidson, the (Anglican) Archbishop of Canterbury wrote to Casement with the following words of praise:

I rejoice ... to think of the effect which has already been produced by your own competent and painstaking study of the question on the spot. I imagine that it is true to say that no one else now alive could have done quite what you have done.³

On the publication of the official Putumayo Blue Book (July 1912), *The Times* of London wrote: 'No one who reads Sir Roger Casement's Report can fail to wish it means and power to extend its civilizing influence. The existing system cries aloud to heaven' (quoted in Goodman, 2009:166). Casement himself greeted the publication of the Blue Book with more exuberant language: 'I've blown up the Devil's Paradise in Peru! ... Putumayo will be cleansed – altho' nothing can bring back the murdered tribes – poor souls.' His contribution was rewarded by the British government with a knighthood. But the affairs of the Putumayo were soon to be superseded in his life, as he was swept up in the turmoil that started with the Home Rule crisis in Ireland and ended with the Easter Rising of 1916. Between these came his sojourn in Germany during World War One and at the end, his capture, trial and execution by hanging in August 1916.

Casement and the Putumayo, 2010

One hundred years on, the centenary of Casement's Putumayo investigation was marked in Latin America by two major conferences, the first in Manaus, Brazil, and the second in Bogotá, Colombia.⁴ Apart from an *Irish Times* report on the Manaus conference, the only centenary publicity I am aware of in Ireland was a short piece in the Irish edition of the *Sunday Times* on 26 December 2010, when it carried a piece on Casement under the heading: 'Casement "was no humanitarian"'. The stimulus for the piece was the publication of an article on Casement and the Amazon in the *Irish Studies Review* written by Lesley Wylie, a lecturer in Latin American Studies at the University of Leicester.⁵ Summarizing her general thesis, Wylie writes:

This article will suggest that Casement's views on race and empire remained more or less consistent with British imperial ideology, at least with respect to non-Irish affairs, well after the Congo investigations were concluded. (316)

While there is much that is valuable and suggestive in Wylie's analysis and while it makes a limited acknowledgement (grudging almost) of Casement's humanitarianism, the thrust of her article is to suggest that behind the humanitarianism lay a basically unchanged imperial ideology, in other words that there is a major disjuncture between his feelings of sympathy and his formal imperialist and racist ideology. I suspect that a contributing factor to this interpretation is a reading of his personality. Wylie opens her article by referring to

one of the commonly ascribed characterizations of his personality, his 'dividedness'; other terms she calls on are 'paradoxes', 'contradictions', his 'ambiguous middle line in the divisions of Irish life', his being 'marked by estrangement' (re Ireland). All seem designed to convey an impression of inconsistency, and they set the scene for her thesis – of the non-humanitarian humanitarian. In all of this one misses a balanced recognition of the broader dimension of his work.

Casement's Contribution Assessed

It is universally acknowledged that Roger Casement had a campaigning commitment to indigenous human rights, but there is more disagreement on whether he had a supporting theoretical framework. Two historians who have written perceptively about Casement have disagreed on the quality of his ideas. Andrew Porter has suggested that Casement failed to produce 'any sustained or ... mature reflection' on imperialism and that he was not a systematic thinker (quoted in O'Callaghan, 2005:56–7). Margaret O'Callaghan disagrees: 'Contrary to Porter's claim', she argues, Casement 'does have a theoretical model of colonial expansion ... He had, by any reckoning, probably made a greater contribution elsewhere than any other theorist of the evils of empire' (*ibid.*: 57–8).

I would place myself somewhere between Porter and O'Callaghan. From reading Bernard Porter's *Critics of Empire: British Radicals and the Imperial Challenge*, first published in 1968, one can identify two reasons why Casement's ideas are under-recognized. Firstly, Porter points out, most of the early critiques of empire he brings to light were totally unknown until the 1960s. And since, on the one hand, few of Casement's writings were published until much later than the 1960s (for example the two volumes edited by Angus Mitchell, 1997, 2003) and since, on the other hand, his ideas are scattered through his writings, his neglect as a critic of empire is understandable. Secondly, Porter points out that Africa was the predominant focus of early critiques, while India and Ireland (let alone Latin America) tended not to be included, a bias he acknowledges in his own book (Porter 2008: xvi). Hence, even though Casement's critique of Congo atrocities was known, because of the neglect of Latin America and of Ireland (especially given the importance of Ireland in Casement's world view), it is again no surprise that his contribution was neglected. With regard to the significance of Ireland to Casement, Margaret O'Callaghan is insightful when she writes that: 'the relationship between Casement's consular career, his mounting anti-imperialism, and his increasingly more self-conscious nationalism, is complicated and dialectical, not linear and sequential' (O'Callaghan: 49). He saw, for example, a direct parallel between the historical conquest of Ireland, especially the wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the colonial processes in Africa and South America – it's a theme that runs through his writing (*ibid.*: 48, 51).

Casement's phrase, 'more power to the Indians', in the title of the present article, illustrates this, resonating as it does with the colloquial use of English in Ireland.

In this context, I wish to present what I consider to be some patterned ideas of Casement moving from his regional experiences to wider level: (i) exploitation in the Congo and Putumayo as systemic; (ii) his growing recognition of exploitation in other parts of the world; (iii) a range of ideas he expressed on such topics as 'empire', 'capital', 'civilization' and 'land' (see also Ó Síocháin 2005).

Congo and Putumayo – Casement and the 'System'

Casement's African career ended with his Congo investigation of 1903 (published in 1904), which provided the necessary evidence to substantiate accusations of abuses being levelled against the Congo Free State regime. The Report, drawing on Casement's twenty-year experience in Africa, including in the Congo itself, outlined the nature of what he began to call the 'system'. In a letter to the Governor-General of the State, written at the end of his voyage of investigation, he wrote: 'I do not accuse an individual; I accuse a system'. Earlier, more emotionally, when his indignation boiled over during his stay in the Anglo-British India Rubber (ABIR) concession area, his Diary entry for 30 August reads: '16 men women & children tied up ... Infamous shameful system.'

The 'system' comprised a number of components:

- The State was directly involved in the economy – State officials were encouraged to increase rubber production and the greater the rubber output, the greater their commissions;
- vast tracts of land were parcelled out to private capital (the concessionaires), the State benefiting through what today we might call 'interlocking directorships';
- the economy was a siphon economy, with goods of very considerable value going out (rubber), but few trade goods coming in – and prominent in the list of imports being guns;
- the exploitation of local labour.

Casement's Report builds up a picture of the unrelenting oppression of the Congo State system on the local population (for details see Ó Síocháin and O'Sullivan 2003). And, of course, the Report documents the integral role of force in making this system operate: the armed punitive expeditions, the standard placement of 'forest guards' or sentries in native villages, the keeping of women and children as hostages to ensure the work compliance of husbands, the confiscation of canoes and other objects of value (e.g. brass rods/money), the fines on villages, the flogging and imprisonment, the shootings and beatings, the cutting off of hands.

When later he came to experience what he called the 'grim tragedy' of the Putumayo, rooted in 'this

wretched rush for “black gold”, it was, he felt, ‘a bigger crime than that of the Congo, although committed on a far smaller stage and affecting only a few thousands of human beings, whereas the other affected millions’. It amounted to, he believed, an internal slave trade. Given the way in which he had come to recognize the systemic nature of Congo exploitation, it is not surprising that, though acknowledging the differences, he also came to describe Putumayo atrocities as systemic also. ‘The system,’ he wrote, ‘I should attribute to the company; the individual crimes were frequently excesses of degenerate men who were employed in a responsible capacity’.

If we focus on labour exploitation, we can see that Casement has recognized the enormous amount of labour supplied by the indigenous population. At one point he listed the various tasks:

From building these huge houses (this one is fully 45 yards long and as strong as an old three-decker) clearing great tracts of forest, making plantations of yucca, mealy, sugar cane, &c. constructing roads and bridges at great labour, for these men to more easily get at them – to supplying them with ‘wives’, with food, with game from the chase, often with their own food just made for their own pressing wants, with labour to meet every conceivable form of demand. All this the Indians supply for absolutely no remuneration of any kind, this entirely in addition to the India rubber which is the keystone of the arch.

In Africa Casement had talked at times of the laziness of the people, but in the Putumayo his comments were on the constant work of the Indians and of the laziness of the overseers (an example of the trope reversals one finds in Casement, unacknowledged by Wylie). In exchange for their labour the Indians got little. From inventories he took of station stores, Casement concluded that virtually worthless items were given in payment for substantial loads of rubber. A tin bowl was given an Indian for an entire *fabrico* load – 70 to 80 kilos of rubber; the recipient threw it on the ground and left in disgust. He discovered, too, the degree to which the Barbadian employees were in debt to the Company.

And, as in the Congo, an integral part of the system was the use of force and great cruelty. There were the stocks (*cepo*), the routine floggings (‘wealfare’), the shootings, cases of men being held under the water and half-drowned, the case of the burning of an old woman. Sexual depravity also: ‘concubines everywhere’, in Casement’s words; women, too, could be raped while in the stocks. The Barbadian employees were used ‘to help control the Indian population’. Casement stated that ‘all the men still remaining at the time of my visit were employed in guarding or coercing or in actively maltreating Indians to force them to work and bring in india-rubber to the various sections’. ‘There is fear

all round’, he commented in the charged atmosphere of La Chorrera.

Beyond Congo and Putumayo

His experience of life in Latin America undoubtedly widened Casement’s perspective on the incidence of oppression in the world; he became increasingly aware that it was not confined to the Congo and Putumayo but was close to being global. In 1911, for example, when struggling against the rubber regime in the Putumayo, he was becoming increasingly aware of similar patterns of exploitation elsewhere in Latin America. During his evidence in London to the Parliamentary Select Committee on the Putumayo, he said: ‘I believe there are very wrongful things taking place in that great forest in connection with getting rubber, and I would say wherever there are wild Indians the same methods are employed.’ Elsewhere, exhorting his friend Edmond Morel, he wrote:

These slave pits of the earth – Congo, French Congo, Mexico, Peru, possibly Korea and Formosa under the Japanese, Angola with Sao Tomé under the Portuguese – these damnable sites of the slaver must be assailed ... Tackling Leopold in Africa has set in motion a big movement – it must be *a movement of human liberation all the world over* ... you must remember that the cause of human freedom is as wide as the world.

Given what was publicly recognized as a deep commitment to the case of the indigenous, it is not surprising that on 6 August 1913 Travers Buxton (acting for the Society) wrote, offering Casement a Vice-Presidency of the Anti-Slavery Society.

Dear Sir Roger, At the last meeting of our Committee it was unanimously resolved that you should be asked to accept the position of a Vice President of this society ... You have already done such notable service to the cause of freedom for native races that it seems only fitting that you should, if you will, be connected with our Society.

Casement politely hesitated but ultimately did not accept the offer. And subsequent events overtook any further involvement along these lines.⁶

Empire, Capital, Civilization, Land: Casement’s Comparative Framework

In addition to his key concept of empire, Bernard Porter lists a number of other topics that ‘usually attached themselves to (modern) imperialism’ and about which there were varied opinions among critics of empire. He includes ‘race, capitalism, modernization, “civilization”’ in his list (Porter 2008: xxix). Scattered through Casement’s writings we can find fairly

consistent patterned ideas concerning empire and these related topics.

Empire. One of his earliest formulations on empire is found in a letter to his English friend, Richard Morten, written at the beginning of 1905, i.e. after his African life but before he was posted to Latin America. The letter also reveals the strongly moral character of his thinking (it deals with three empires – Roman, Spanish, British):

If you would study history more attentively you would see this. Rome centralised the wealth of the ancient world in herself – Italy became a beautiful garden filled with the villas of the rich, maintained by the labour of millions of slaves. And Rome fell. Spain, in her pride, exploited the mines of the Indies by Carib slave labour ... and sent the wealth of Peru, Mexico and the Caribbean sea to Madrid. She had a monopoly of the gold of the world – but she did not know how to use it wisely – and Spain fell. Read Montesquieu's *Considerations sur* the decline and fall of Rome ... and you will ... find considerations in it which will make you tremble when you look at South Africa – and India.

His South American experiences deepened Casement's antipathy to Iberian colonization. He believed that the tragedy of the South American Indian was 'the greatest in the world today, and certainly it has been the greatest wrong for well nigh the last 400 years'. And: 'Iberian civilisation is not Latin civilisation – and the coming of the Spaniards and Portuguese to South America with the resultant destruction of all the Inca, Aztec, Mayan and other civilisations has been an unmitigated loss to the world'.

And with a different target he wrote in 1913: 'Australia, Canada, South Africa, New Zealand are no parts really of an Empire – they are free peoples, learning the width and height and magnitude of freedom too – the Empire consists of Ireland, India, Egypt and the lands inhabited by the weak and exploitable people – and may England's grip on all those lands and peoples be palsied. May the whole "theory of Empire" be sent to jail.' The context here was that all of these other 'white' colonies had by this time got considerable local autonomy ('home rule'), while Ireland was denied any measure.

Capitalism. When a friend, Mitchell Innes, a British diplomat based in Washington, suggested the establishment of an organization to work for indigenous rights, Casement was interested, but, he wrote, the task facing an organization of the type suggested by Innes would be big: 'for it has to tackle an enormous thing. "Commercial interests" are practically modern Civilization itself. They make and remake Governments – and destroy peoples, just as they make war. They build battleships and incidentally sink liners too. "Commercial interests" represent profits – and all

men nearly are after profits. Show them profits – and they won't trouble about making (or breaking) the welfare of peoples.' And: 'Slavery is spreading – the steamboat and steam engines and modern armaments and the whole scheme of modern government are aiding it – with the stock gambling and share market as pillars of the scheme'. Elsewhere he commented that: '... Christianity owns schools and missions as well as Dreadnoughts and dividends'.

Civilization. As his career progressed, Casement began to put the term civilization, one of the three Cs (Christianity, Commerce, Civilization) in inverted commas (another reversed trope), as for example in a letter from 1904 to Alice Stopford Green. The following quote also illustrates O'Callaghan's point about a 'dialectical' process:

I think it must have been my insight into human suffering and into the ways of the spoiler and the ruffian who takes "civilisation" for his watchword when his object is the appropriation of the land and labour of others for his personal profit which the tale of English occupation in Ireland so continually illustrates that gave me the deep interest I felt in the lot of the Congo natives. Every argument by which King Leopold and his aiders seek to justify the merciless oppression of the central African today was stereotyped in the 'Laws' and measures of the past in this country. We had it all, even to "moral and material regeneration".

In the Putumayo, his phrase 'truly a civilising company' (applied to the Peruvian Amazon Company) was used with irony. Elsewhere he talked of an invasion of 'barbarism' (312). And, in typical language, wrote: 'The forest, with its wild creatures, is happier far than the "centres of civilisation" these Peruvian and Colombian miscreants have created and floated into a great London Company'.

Land. Another element was of crucial significance for him (not included by Porter) – the land. The following long extract from a letter he wrote in 1911 to Travers Buxton of the Anti-Slavery Society includes several of the above themes and shows the geographical span of Casement's thinking. In responding to a query from Buxton, Casement launched into a set of reflections:

The expropriation of the Indians and barefaced denial of all rights in land of the Indians is at the bottom of the whole system of slavery that undoubtedly exists in those regions. If the Indians were protected in their land ownership they would not be the easy prey they are today to the exploiter. It is the Leopold system in Africa – all over again – only it is the great original on which conception of 'State' ownership Leopold modelled his astute claims in Congo land ...

If you root the natives in the soil – African or Indian, Polynesian or whatever band of native he may be – you free him.

When the [white] Natal farmers ... some few years ago wanted cheap Zulu labour they got legislation against his ownership in the soil under way – they talked of ‘breaking up the reserves’ as well as taxing his huts. If a native owns land he can live by it and feed himself and wife and children and ultimately grow more than he and they need and so you get the root of all healthy commerce planted too – for he sells thereby his surplus. If you deny him ownership in the soil you render him a landless alien in his own country and drive him into the slave pen in the end – as you see Diaz has done in Mexico.

... the Irish Land War has been a reassertion of a people’s right to live on and by their own soil the effect of which will ultimately travel far beyond the shores of Ireland.

Body slavery and individual ownership and tilling of the soil cannot go together – and if the Peruvians and Mexicans and other Iberian States in South and Central America could be forced or induced to recognise and register native claims to land, resting not on title deeds emanating from a politician but from the obvious long association of the claimant and his forbears with the soil in question then a healthy agricultural life would take the place of this abominable exploitation and concessionaire regime which we find systematically dogged by human slavery wherever it goes ...

It is of little permanent value fighting the slaver, if you don’t go to the root of things and fight these claims to land ownership by States who are, rightly, merely the eyes and ears of the people. We can smash slavery today on the Putumayo perhaps – but it will arise again tomorrow – in a new form if you leave the Indian tribesman without legal recognition of his tribal right to live by and on the soil of his country.

Casement and ‘Race’. Race is one those issues that Porter suggests is frequently found associated with discussions of ‘empire’. And Wylie talks of Casement’s ‘adherence to contemporary discourse of race’. I want to approach the topic of Casement and ‘race’ indirectly, by suggesting that his life-long commitment to what we would today call indigenous rights points to a fundamentally non-racist mentality. But, to put it in the context of his day, I wish to draw attention to the

racist climate of the time, which underpinned the very exploitation which Casement opposed.

The Age of Racism. Writing of Africa, Peter Brantlinger suggests that the ‘Myth of the Dark Continent’ emerged between the abolition of the slave trade and Scramble for Africa at the end of the nineteenth century (1986: 185). He quotes Nancy Stepan as saying that, when the war against slavery was being won, the war against racism was being lost (*ibid.*: 187). By the time of the Berlin Conference of 1884, which marked the carve-up of Africa (and also the commencement of Casement’s life in Africa), ‘the British tended to see Africa as a center of evil, a part of the world possessed by a demonic “darkness” or barbarism, represented above all by slavery and cannibalism, which it was their duty to exorcise’ (*ibid.*: 194). And Bernard Porter tells us that the period between 1895 and 1914 showed the most virulent ... imperialism in both the ideological and popular spheres (Porter 2008: xxi). The anthropology of the time, too, was racist and evolutionary and, says Brantlinger, ‘evolutionary thought seems almost calculated to legitimize imperialism’ (Brantlinger 1986: 206, 203). By the end of the nineteenth century, eugenicists and social darwinists were offering ‘scientific’ justification for genocide and imperialism (*ibid.*: 205).

Darwin, for example, had personal experience of the horrors of extermination when, in Argentina in 1832 during the voyage of the *Beagle*, he came face-to-face with General Rosas in the middle of a drive to exterminate the indigenous population. Yet, when *The Descent of Man* was published in 1871, such destruction was described, in neutral language, as being inevitable: ‘At some future period not very distant as measured in centuries, the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate and replace throughout the world the savage races.’ (Darwin, quoted in Lindqvist 1998: 107). The dominant perspective was that of the inevitability of the disappearance of ‘inferior races’. It is reflected in the 1898 comment made during a speech by Lord Salisbury, Casement’s employer at one point, when he said: ‘One can roughly divide the nations of the world into the living and the dying’ (quoted in Lindqvist: 140).

On the question of race, it is not difficult to find comments by Casement that can be characterized as racist; easiest, perhaps, from his period in Brazil. One example from Pará, Brazil, will suffice: ‘Only a fortnight after his arrival, he sent two broadsides to Lord Dufferin, stating his intention to resign shortly. The people and the cost of living were his main targets. The former were rude, uncouth and arrogant:

They are nearly all hideous cross-breeds – of Negro-Portuguese with, up here in the Amazon, a very large admixture of native Indian blood. Altogether the resulting human compost is the nastiest form of black-pudding you have ever sat down to. The native African is a decent, friendly,

courteous soul – the Indian, too, I dare say, is a hardy savage *chez lui* – but the ‘Brazilian’ is the most arrogant, insolent and pig-headed brute in the world I should think.’

But it is vital to assess such utterances in the context of the broad patterns of Casement’s ideas (above) and (below) of his life commitment to what we would today call ‘indigenous rights’.

Casement’s Commitment to the Indigenous.

Casement was not unique in not sharing the dominant ideology, but by personality, by values and by historical circumstances, his support for indigenous rights developed into a life commitment. What comes across very strongly is that throughout his career Casement was possessed of a deep feeling for other humans, colonial subjects. This is attested by friends and observers as well as from his own words and actions.

Casement’s attitude as well as the dominant ideology of the time can be sensed in a comment made by a Niger colleague (addressing a new arrival):

We call old Roger the Black Man’s Friend; I don’t know that I personally agree entirely with his policy, it is what some people call pro-native, but he is a very good chap, and he can go anywhere amongst them.

We can, of course, document Casement’s commitment from his own words. His general attitude can be found in more measured tone in an observation he made in a letter he wrote from South Africa, during the Boer War, to Sir Martin Gosselin, a superior at the Foreign Office. He was writing about the ill-treatment of black British subjects from the West African colonies, who were working in the Congo:

I have written you a long letter, but I know that you are interested in the welfare of our native subjects residing there. The simplest way to secure their well being is, perhaps, to strive for that of all natives of the Congo. It is difficult to obtain a special recognition of and favourable treatment for one class of black men, when the whole practice of executive obligations towards natives is so wilfully wrong as it is upon the Congo today.

His humanity is clearly evident when one looks at concrete examples of his intervention in cases of cruelty. I am struck by the similarity between the earliest case I have found of his protesting brutality, in the Congo, and a late example from the Putumayo. The first dates to April 1887, when he was in his early twenties, the perpetrator being Lieutenant Francqui, Commissaire of the Cataract Region, whom Casement twice saw engaging in acts of brutality. When he complained to

the judicial authority at Boma, the Free State capital, he was informed that ‘I had no right of intervention on behalf of the people he had injured’.

One of them, who had been so cruelly flogged by this officer’s direction and under his eyes that he was literally cut to pieces, I had to have carried in my own hammock for over fifty miles when taking him to Boma to the State Doctor to have his wounds dressed and in order that I might lodge a complaint on his behalf ... I was laughed at for my pains ... Lieutenant Francqui was never punished.

The Putumayo example occurred during the return march through the forest, from Matanzas to Entre Rios. On the morning of 19 October (1910), Casement set off and his journey coincided with a *fabrico*, and a straggling line of Indians, taking loads of rubber down by Entre Rios to Puerto Peruano. On the road, he met an Andokes woman carrying a load of rubber, but in distress and unable to go any further. They stopped once more, took her load of rubber, gave her tea and helped her on:

The woman could hardly walk, and that task of getting her on was a very slow one. She fell several times, and I gave her my walking stick to help her trembling legs. She gave way constantly at the knees and fell. I cried a good deal, I must confess. I was thinking of Mrs. Green and Mrs. Morel if they had been and could have seen this piteous being – this gentle-voiced woman – a wife and mother – in such a state.

So, what of Casement and ‘race’? The topic, I believe, must be interpreted, on the one hand, in light of the ‘world view’ elements that I have outlined: the structural or systematic nature of Congo and Putumayo exploitation; the increasingly worldwide vision he had of parallel abuses; and the attitudes he expressed on empire and its associated features (capitalism, civilization, land). And, on the other hand, it must take into account his full commitment to the cause of the indigenous. In light of all of this, I find it difficult to accept the validity of Wylie’s characterizations.

Conclusion

In a short book published in 1992 to mark the 500th anniversary of Columbus’s arrival in the Americas, the Irish writer Peadar Kirby draws attention to ‘certain similarities of historical experience between Ireland and all the countries of Latin America’, and goes on to suggest that: ‘In some ways, our history is closer to that of Latin America than is that of any other European country’ (1992: 10). First in his list of shared features is ‘a common experience of sustained and violent colonisation which **destroyed the native civilisations it encountered**’ (*ibid.*, emphasis added).

As well as causing psychic damage, conquest led to a similar sequence in economic life, from inherited economic dependence, through (in more recent times) experimentation with import substitution industrialization, and then an opening to multinational investment.

While Latin American countries may have been formally independent, Casement observed (if sketchily) the general impact on indigenous populations of empire, colonialism, and capitalism, as well as the specific horrors of places like the Putumayo. He saw the process of colonialism, of conquest, being played out still in his own day in the upper reaches of the Amazon. If the parallel histories of Latin America and Ireland involved, in Kirby's terms, the destruction of the native civilizations encountered, Roger Casement's major historical contribution was directed at one specific moment in the assault on indigenous peoples and cultures.

Ronald Niezen suggests that today indigenous identity is a near-global phenomenon (2003: 11). Its origins and its binding component lie, he suggests in 'a common experience ... of illegitimate, meaningless, and dishonourable suffering' (*ibid.*: 13, and cf. 86–93). Or, more elaborately: 'The indigenous peoples' movement has arisen out of the shared experiences of marginalized groups facing the negative impacts of resource extraction and economic modernization and ... the social convergence and homogenization that these ambitions tend to bring about' (*ibid.*: 9). In two cases, the Congo and the Putumayo, Roger Casement brought about a heightened public awareness of the negative impact of resource extraction in the case of one commodity, rubber. He tried, more perhaps in the case of the Congo than of the Putumayo, to give a voice to the local population; but his voice and that of campaigning organizations (The Congo Reform Association, the Aborigine Protection Society) were still the dominant mediating ones. Today, indigenism has its own voice, being both a vibrant social movement and a participant in formal political processes. But today, too, it needs the support of agencies from the wider community, both at international level and at local level (Niezen, 2003; Van Cott 2005) just as it did in Casement's day.

One hundred years on, it is our duty to try to rigorously assess the whole Putumayo episode, including the general impact of Casement's intervention. There is plenty to criticise, yes; there are limitations and distortions to his thinking on the local culture and on the various spatial dimensions of the story (e.g. local-regional-national). An assessment should include wider issues: the impact the rapid emergence of plantation-grown rubber had in undermining the economy of wild rubber; the impact of the outbreak of World War One; an account of the continuing sufferings of the indigenous population of the area since Casement's day. Included also should be those issues mentioned by Wylie, such as the story of the two youths he brought

to England to contribute to the Putumayo campaign, and his proposal for a Catholic mission to the area. And it should address the question of Casement's 'racism' or otherwise.

In a regularly quoted passage, Joseph Conrad presents two images of Casement. One is the picture of the colonial-type figure striding into and out of the forest with his crook-handled stick, followed by his bull-dogs and servant; the other is the comparison he makes between Casement and Bartolomé de las Casas, an earlier defender of the indigenous inhabitants of Latin America. Given the ongoing linkage that today exists between indigenous and non-indigenous, and of Casement's remarkable interventions a century ago, I believe the second of Conrad's images is the more fitting today: 'I have always thought some part of Las Casas' soul had found refuge in his indomitable body'.

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Notes

- ¹ This is a shortened version of papers presented at (a) a conference in Bogotá from 26–29 October 2010: 'El Paraíso del Diablo – Roger Casement y el Informe del Putumayo un siglo después' / 'The Devil's Paradise – Roger Casement and the Putumayo Report a century later', and (b) a workshop held in the National University of Ireland Maynooth, Saturday 26 March 2011, entitled: 'Genocide 101: The Atrocities of the Amazon Rubber Boom, Roger Casement's Putumayo Journey, Contemporary Cultural Representations Thereof'.
- ² The PAC had London capital and a mostly-London-based Board of Directors. The driving force, though, was a local cacique, Julio Arana, hence the local name, Casa Arana.
- ³ Unless otherwise indicated, quotations draw on my 2008 biography of Casement; precise sources can be found there.
- ⁴ The Manaus conference, 'Rubber, the Amazon and the Atlantic World 1870–1913 – Roger Casement', was held on 23–24 August 2010. *The Irish Times* (4/9/10) carried a report, which also included comment on Mario Vargas Llosa's new novel on Casement. For the second conference see Note 1, above.
- ⁵ Lesley Wylie, 'Rare models: Roger Casement, the Amazon, and the ethnographic picturesque', *Irish Studies Review*, 18(3) 2010, 315–330.
- ⁶ This episode should throw light on the question of his acceptance of a knighthood, used against him during his trial. It seems reasonable to suggest that he disliked honours and that his acceptance of a knighthood only came after friends advised him that its rejection could damage his Putumayo work.