

‘The Soul Shone Through His Face’: Roger Casement in Works of Fiction

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Abstract: *The aim of this article is to discuss the issue of the representation of the Irish revolutionary Roger David Casement in works of fiction and radio drama under the light of cultural trauma theory. It will investigate the way in which the image of Roger Casement can be associated with traumatic events that have sealed Anglo-Irish relations in his life, in Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World* (1912) and Jamie O’Neill’s *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001); in his trial in Mario Vargas Llosa’s *The Dream of the Celt*, and finally, and in his afterlife, in David Rudkin’s *Cries from Casement as his Bones are Brought to Dublin* and in the Annabel Davis-Goff’s *The Fox’s Walk*.*

Keywords: Roger Casement, trauma, representation, history, fiction

Roger Casement and cultural trauma theory

The legacy of the controversial Irish revolutionary Roger David Casement is still object of much dispute in academia, to the extent that doing research on this subject is the equivalent of treading on dangerous ground. Keeping this in mind, this article¹ is an attempt to approach the question that has long been asked by scholars and critics: who is Roger Casement? Even one hundred years after his death, a definite answer is still allusive. Although it is beyond my reach to solve this enigma, I propose to shed some light on it by approaching not Casement the man, the historical figure whose life has been object of much dispute, but his representation as a character in works of fiction and radio drama.

I argue that the different representations of Roger Casement in four novels and one radio play written from 1912 to 2010 reveal that he can be associated with traumatic events that have become constitutive of Anglo-Irish relations. These works portray Casement in his lifetime in Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World* (1912) and in Jamie O’Neill’s *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001); in his trial and the discovery of the *Black Diaries* in Mario Vargas Llosa’s *The Dream of the Celt* (2010); and in his afterlife as a ghost in David Rudkin’s *Cries from Casement as his Bones are Brought to Dublin* (1973) and in Annabel Davis-Goff’s *The Fox’s Walk* (2003).

As my focus is on issues that stem from past traumatic events involving Roger Casement, the theoretical underpinning is based on cultural trauma theory, which will enable a better understanding of the way in which his image is linked to some of

the traumas that have resulted from British Imperialism in the transatlantic world. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an “overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11). Caruth argues that through the notion of cultural trauma, one should be able to rethink a traumatic event, which must be directed not “at eliminating history, [but] at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting history to arise where our immediate understanding may not.” (11).

In *Critical Encounters* Caruth also writes that literature is relevant for the process of coping with traumatic incidents, as it presents a narrative that is not referential, in the sense that it does not refer directly to the traumatic event:

How can we think of a referential – or historical, or material – dimension of texts that is not simply opposed to their fictional powers? How might the very fictional power of texts be, not a hindrance to, but a means of gaining access to their referential force? (2)

North American sociologist Ron Eyerman adds to this by distinguishing between individual trauma and trauma as a cultural process, that is, “[...] a tear in the social fabric affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion”. He also contends that “it may be necessary to establish some event as the significant ‘cause’” so that its traumatic meaning can be “established and accepted, a process which requires time, as well as mediation and representation” (Ch. 1).

Since in these works about Roger Casement the authors write about unresolved events related to the birth of the Irish nation, they portray “enduring effects” of “national trauma”. Working though national trauma always engages a “meaning struggle”, a grappling with an event that involves identifying the “nature of pain, the nature of the victim and the attribution of responsibility” (Alexander et al., qtd. in Eyerman Ch. 1).

In this process of dealing with the trauma of a nation, those which Eyerman calls “carrier groups” play a significant role in the representation of the “interests and desires of the affected to a wider public” (Eyerman Ch. 1). Literary writers may also be part of this “carrier group” not only by giving voice to their own ideas and interests, but also by articulating ideas to and for others. According to Eyerman, this is a process of mediation that “aims to reconstitute or reconfigure a collective identity through collective representation, [as] a way of repairing the tear in the social fabric” (Ch. 1).

In a bird’s eye view, it is also relevant to mention that by employing the term “representation”, I take on Noel Salazar’s, definition of it as “a presentation drawn up not by depicting the object as it is, but by re-presenting it or constructing it in a new form and/or environment”. (172) It is important to highlight that the act of representing is never neutral as “it is impossible to divorce [it] from the society and the culture that produces [it].” (Salazar 172) Consequently, there will “always be a gap between intention and realization, original and copy”.

Thus, it is pertinent to compare and contrast texts by authors writing about Roger Casement under different spatial and temporal perspectives, for, as Luke Gibbons has noted, the narrative form is a means of preserving the historical experience “[...] and through periodic retelling those narratives become traditionalized [...] Each new context in which a story is told gives meaning to it, because the telling implies metaphoric connection between the past and the present” (Gibbons 12). Since the story of Roger Casement encapsulates several traumas related to transatlantic history, it has also been followed by long periods of silence since his execution for high treason on 3 August 1916. Hence, the selected works delved into in this paper seek to reshape this silence into a narrative form as an effort to restore Casement to his proper place in transatlantic history.

Among fictitious representations of Roger Casement depicted in his lifetime, I have selected Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World* that deals with Roger Casement in South America. The other is Jamie O’Neill’s *At Swim, Two Boys*, which depicts Casement’s role as an offstage collaborator to the movement for Irish independence, which culminated in the 1916 Easter Rising. The point that will be highlighted in this novel is the way in which the echoes of Roger Casement are essential for providing a coherent background and setting in both novels, as they address key historical moments in which Casement was actively involved.

The Lost World was published in 1912, two years after Conan Doyle and Casement had met and kept in correspondence. My aim is to trace the way in which the character Lord John Roxton, based on Casement, is portrayed as a Victorian heroic figure in this “wild boy’s book”. The analysis is based on the close reading of intrinsic elements in this novel that bear an intertextual relation to Roger Casement’s travelogues written during the period he spent in the Putumayo, as part of an official Commission that inquired working conditions of the native rubber collectors. I argue that these texts are not only responsible for constructing the setting and the characters of the novel, but they re also responsible for the structuring of the plot itself.

Conan Doyle’s novel tells the well-known story of an expedition commanded by Prof. Challenger sent to an isolated South American plateau, which is likely to be Mount Roraima, to confirm the existence of pre-historic life. Before the group heads to *The Lost World*, the journalist Ed Malone meets Lord Roxton, his expedition partner, in order to discuss particularities of the journey. Although Malone was aware of his companion’s familiarity with South America, he was surprised to see how Roxton “had become legendary amongst the riverine native, who looked upon [him] as their champion and protector” (77). Malone, then, narrates what he calls “real facts” of Roxton’s life who:

[...] had found himself some years before in that no-man’s land which is formed by the half-defined frontiers between Peru, Brazil, and Colombia. In this great district the wild rubber tree flourishes and has become, as in the Congo, a curse to the natives [...] A handful of villainous half-breeds dominated the country, armed such Indians as would support them, and turned the rest into slaves,

terrorizing them with the most inhuman tortures in order to force them to gather the India-rubber, which was then floated down to river Para. Lord John Roxton expostulated on behalf of the wretched victims and received nothing but threats and insults for his pains. He then formally declared war against Pedro Lopez, the leader of the slave-drivers, enrolled a band of runaway slaves in his service, armed them, and conducted a campaign, which ended by his killing with his own hands the notorious half-breed and breaking down the system which he represented (Conan Doyle 78).

This passage details the facts of Lord John's life that are intimately connected to Casement's. Both fictitious and historical figures are disappointed in the system of exploitation that was imposed upon the Putumayo Indians. In *The Lost World*, Lord John literally arms the Indians, declares war against the employees of the Company and ultimately kills one of them, Pedro Lopez. Similarly, Casement expresses in *The Amazon Journal* that he was inclined to do what Lord John had done. During the process in which the revolutionary facet of Casement's identity begins to overshadow the imperialist one, the British Consul reveals his subversive feelings towards the indigenous peoples and his wish to arm them against the villains: "I have more than sympathy – I would dearly love to arm them, to train them, and drill them to defend themselves against these ruffians" (Conan Doyle 310).

An imperative parallel between the historical figure Casement and the character Lord Roxton can be drawn in terms of the role they played in Brazil and Peru during the rubber boom. Both Lord Roxton and Casement are portrayed heroically and this is shown in their rage against the ill-treatment of the indigenous populations, which is directed at the Peruvian slave drivers: Pedro Lopez, who Lord Roxton kills in *The Lost World*, and Negretti who Casement wishes to kill in *The Amazon Journal*.

Even though Conan Doyle claims that his novel does not aim to promote social consciousness, the fictitious representation of Casement as Lord John Roxton is a window through which one may glimpse into the trauma inflicted by the aftermath of the rubber boom in the early 20th century Amazon region, revealing the control by a sovereign power over a subjugated people.

The second novel that portrays Casement in his lifetime, albeit in a different moment, is *At Swim, Two Boys*, published in 2001, by Irish writer Jamie O'Neill. North American critic Joseph Valente has described it as a double *Bildungsroman* that traces the coming of age both of the Irish nation and the discovery of love between two boys, Jim Mack and Doyley Doyle. Although these stories are intertwined, my focus is on the implications of the role played by Roger Casement as a minor character in the 1916 Easter Rising. I look at the way in which Casement's collaboration with the Rebellion is paralleled in the actions of Eva MacMurrough, a female aristocratic patron of the nationalist cause, through her memories of Casement and through rumours that are spread in Dublin about his actions in Germany that led to his imprisonment and trial. Eva is a

passionate and generous woman who had sheltered Casement, whom she describes as a saviour and god-like figure: “The first time I saw him, I was struck. I knew immediately I was in the presence of something extraordinary in our land. Something we had not seen in Ireland for centuries. The soul shone through his face.” (O’Neill 449)

At Swim, Two Boys also deals with the way in which the trauma of making contentious overseas alliances in Ireland by the MacMurrough lineage, which dates back to the 12th century. This is clear in a dialogue between two characters that point to Daniel Maclise’s painting *The Marriage of Strongbow and Eva* and say:

“And she never married, did she, our particular Eva [...] though they did say she made quite a run at Casement when he was here.”

MacMurrough turned. “Casement?”

“Don’t start me on that blackguard. An Irishman, a Protestant even, prancing about Deutschland tempting our men to turn traitor. Our brave Irish prisoners of war, wants to turn them into renegades. Man’s a blackguard, a cad”.

A name at last. Casement. “In Germany, you say?” (O’Neill 267)

The painting functions as a mirror reflecting the relationship between Eva and Casement, revealing “the concealed historical identity in which the MacMurroughs are descended not from fervent nationalists, but from the father and the daughter guilty of inviting the invasion and sealing the bargain with the (Norman and then British) invaders” (156).

And so, the absence of Casement as a character in the traditional sense does not imply his exclusion from the nationalist project of turning Ireland into “a nation once again”. On the contrary, in that Casement’s oblique presence looms anachronistically both over the rebellion and over two boys, Jim and Doyler, who have chosen to fight in the Rising in the name of “a nation of the heart”, one where the struggle for the independence of the Irish nation would coincide with the movement for individual freedom.

What follows is a brief discussion about the novel *The Dream of the Celt*, by Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa, which deals with the trauma evoked by Casement’s “Trial” for high treason in 1916. This novel, which is a fictionalized biography, was widely translated and published owing to its release coinciding with the appointment of Mario Vargas Llosa as a Nobel Prize laureate in 2010. *The Dream of the Celt* deserves examination as it depicts Casement in chief moments of his life, ending with his death at the gallows of Pentonville Prison in London. The main thread is Casement’s trial, more specifically, when he is incarcerated waiting for the result of the plea for clemency. It is by means of Casement’s reminiscences and memories of the past, recounted by an omniscient narrator, that the main events of his life are unveiled to the reader. I have, elsewhere, concentrated on the device employed by Vargas Llosa of intersecting the main narrative with dreams, fantasy and diary entries, which enable a more neutral approach of polemical issues such as Casement’s alleged homosexuality and the *Black Diaries*, as can be seen in the following passage:

From time to time, as he had done so often in Africa and Brazil, he made love alone, scribbling on the pages of his diary, in a nervous, hurried hand, synthetic phrases, sometimes as unrefined as those lovers of a few minutes or hours whom he then had to gratify. These simulacra plunged him into a depressing stupor, and so he tried to space them, for nothing made him so conscious of his solitude and clandestine situation, which he knew very well, would be with him until his death. (Vargas Llosa 298-99)

Vargas Llosa points out that there have been changes in the way one conceives of one's national heroes, as is the case with Casement:

Slowly his compatriots became resigned to accepting that a hero and martyr is not an abstract prototype or a model of perfection but a human being made of contradictions and contrasts, weakness and greatness, since a man, as José Enrique Rodó wrote, "is many men," which means that angels and demons combine inextricably in his personality. (Vargas Llosa 354)

What is at stake in *The Dream of the Celt* is what to be remembered and what to be forgotten, and this is intricately related to Casement's alleged treachery and homosexuality that are seen as part and parcel of his nationalist convictions. Instead of giving a final solution to the enigma that is the life of Roger Casement, Vargas Llosa maintains the ambivalences inherent to the man, whose personality, in his words, is made up of both "angels and demons" (Vargas Llosa 354).

Finally, I will approach two works that are concerned with the traumatic impact of Roger Casement's "Afterlife", especially its resonance among the Anglo-Irish Protestants who sympathized with the Irish nationalist cause. The first is the radio play *Cries from Casement as his Bones are Brought to Dublin*, and the second is the novel *The Fox's Walk*. My analysis revolves around the impacts that Casement's death had in terms of his reburial from Pentonville Prison, in London, to Glasnevin Cemetery, in Dublin, in the year of 1965, which coincides with the outset of the Troubles and the partition of Ireland.

Cries from Casement as his Bones are Brought to Dublin was written by David Rudkin, English playwright of Northern Irish ancestry, in 1973. My analysis is based on Ian Rabey's premise that Rudkin "fragments [his] subject in order to see him whole" (50). This fragmentation is present both in form and in content, and it is the task of an active reader to join these fragments and create a whole image of the man. Two main aspects of *Cries from Casement* are approached: firstly, the way in which the character of the metafictional *Author* joins different fragments of Casement's identity in an attempt to make sense of him in terms of his nationalism and his sexuality. Secondly, Rudkin touches on the controversy over the repatriation of Casement's bones as an allegory of a fragmented Ireland dealing with the consequences of partition. It is also an attempt to promote the reconciliation of Ireland with the aftermath of the 1916 Easter Rising, and with the present time of the Troubles.

According to Kevin Grant (2002), it is believed that Casement embodied the humiliation of partition for Irish nationalists, in the sense that at the same time they lacked the power to repatriate Casement's body to Antrim, as had been his dying wish, they were also unable to seize the six northern colonies of Ulster that remained loyal to the British Crown. Additionally, Grant suggests that the fact that Casement's remains were repatriated in the year of the 40th anniversary of the final determination of the boundary of Ireland's partition was overlooked. This is due to the reason that the dispute over the location of Casement's body had its origins in Anglo-Irish colonial conflict and Ireland's politico-sectarian divide. In this regard, the decision of Taoiseach, or Prime Minister Lemass' government to bury Casement in the Republic of Ireland could be considered a symbolic submission to the partition and British postcolonial domination (Grant 353).

This submission of Ireland to partition is challenged in *CFC* after Casement was buried at the main entrance of Glasnevin cemetery where he encounters the ghost of the *Youth*, a young patriot not yet born, bleeding, maimed from an explosion, and speaking with a Northern Irish accent. The *Youth* explains to Casement that he is unwanted there due to the fact that the Barrister Edward Carson had managed to defeat Home Rule in Ulster, and his body was still a reminder of a divided country:

Casement: Why am I here? Buried forever, far from home...

Youth: We'll have to dig you up again [...] Carson and them ones won. there is a border. Where you'd lie is on that other side. Our side.

Casement: Now I understand. The job is not done. Relevance on relevance, me in my life a symbol of Ireland's seceding, a token of her fracture in my death: an exile even in my grave. Am I to have no rest from this paradoxical significance? Have I to be exhumed and buried yet again? (Rudkin 77)

This spectral *Youth* that speaks to the ghost of Roger Casement foreshadows the Troubles that were to commence with the founding of the Ulster Volunteer Force in 1966 – one year after Casement's exhumation in 1965 – that would last until the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. The Troubles were a time of social and political impasse which Joe Cleary (2002), quoting Antonio Gramsci, terms an *interregnum*, a concept applied to partitioned societies that have undergone periods of uninterrupted turmoil, as is the case with Ulster. For Gramsci, "the concept of the "interregnum" refers to those long periods in which the ruling class losing its consensus, "no longer 'leading' but only 'dominant', exercising coercive force alone" (qtd. in Cleary 8). What follows the "interregnum", Gramsci argues, is that societies undergo a moment of drastic change, one in which "the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe in what they used to believe previously" (8).

In *CFC* the unborn *Youth* symbolizes the "interregnum", this period of stagnation, for one of its chief effects is that, "the old is dying and the new cannot be born [...]" (8). In such context, the end of the Troubles would allow the emergence of "new arrangements"

between the two parts involved – the North and the South – whereby Casement’s remains would be granted a third burial in the grounds of a united Ireland.

Similarly to *Cries from Casement as his Bones are Brought to Dublin*, Irish writer Annabel Davis-Goff’s *The Fox’s Walk* deals with traumatic incidents deeply associated with Anglo-Irish relations, and its aim is to revisit the past as a way to deal with historical memory. The story is told through the perspective of middle aged Alice Moore, in 1965, year of the reburial of Casement’s remains in Glasnevin cemetery, Dublin. This event reawakens Alice’s memories of Casement’s trial in 1916 and the trauma caused the hanging of Casement by the British and its impacts to the Anglo-Irish Protestants supportive of the Irish nationalist cause. In the novel, the violence that succeeded the execution of the 1916 rebel leaders, including Casement, affected negatively the Anglo-Irish who became victims of ambushes and had their houses burned down, which was ultimately the case with Ballydavid, Alice Moore’s family property, signalling the end of an old order, that had existed for 300 years, and its replacement for a new one.

After Alice heard the news of the death sentence of the rebel leaders she was overtaken with fear, and the executions that impressed her most were that of Roger Casement – who she learned would not be shot by a firing squad, but hanged – and of Constance Markiewicz – both Anglo-Irish like herself. As a result, Alice had been having vivid dreams:

In my dreams I had been condemned to death. ... I had not been imprisoned but I had only four days before I was to be executed ... Implicit in everyone of these nightmares was the never-quite-present Countess Markiewicz who, in her beautiful pale dress, waited in a condemned cell. Roger Casement, with his ascendency tweed suit and his saintly smile, farther away, made a less substantial member of our trio. (Davis-Goff 257)

This excerpt reflects Cathy Caruth’s notion of trauma, not as the wound of the body, but as a wound of the mind inflicted by the exposure to a traumatic incident. Since she was still quite young, Alice was unable to cope with the fact that the Anglo-Irish people were being sentenced to death. To her mind, if this could happen to Casement and Constance Markiewicz, it could also happen to herself. Since young Alice is not able to translate her fear into words, it is materialised in the form of dreams, for, according to Caruth (1996), “[...] trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena.” (Caruth 91)

Apart from the fear of herself and of Casement being executed, on 3rd August 1916, the day of the hanging, Alice felt guilty of his death; her sadness “... was nothing compared to the guilt I felt for my unpatriotic sympathy for the man being tried and for my honour at his trial – Casement, pale, handsome, sad, dignified, and sick, his persecutors smug and brutish bullies. I hated them, and I feared them” (Davis-Goff 282) following

Casement's execution, Alice comes to realize that her partisanship is not as clear as it once was, for she felt that the British forces that the Anglo-Irish had for centuries relied on, failed them.

In short, Casement had to move away from Ireland, into the Amazonian and Congolese forests to find himself, "the incorrigible Irishman", and turn into an Irish nationalist. Alice, however, did not need to travel far away to realize the negative effects of Imperialism, for in Ireland she experienced the clash and social divisions existing amongst her own people: the Irish Catholics and Protestants.

When I started writing this article, my intention was to tackle the long asked question regarding the identity of the multifaceted historical figure Roger David Casement. I have tried to answer this query by analysing his representation as a fictitious character in four novels and one radio play under the light of trauma theory. In order to demonstrate my hypothesis that the figure of Roger Casement is associated to specific traumatic incidents of Anglo-Irish history, I have alluded to the fact that during Casement's life, trial, and even his afterlife, he found himself within a liminal position: an Anglo-Irish British Consul with revolutionary inclinations.

The discussion was centered on the way in which a narrative written in the present is haunted by events that have taken place in the past, according to the Caruthian concepts of "belatedness" and "repetition". Following this train of thought, the representation of Roger Casement in his life in *The Lost World*, and *At Swim, Two Boys*, in his trial in *The Dream of Celt*, and in his afterlife in *Cries from Casement as his Bones are Brought to Dublin* and *The Fox's Walk*, can be seen as a metaphor for the traumatic process itself: "an embodiment of the disjunction of temporality, [and] the surfacing of the past in the present." (Whitehead 6)

Moreover, these fictitious representations reveal that there still is a struggle to recognize and acknowledge the exploration and the devaluation of the weakest, and Casement was the fragile link of the chain that was the imperial mode of operation of the British Empire. The use made by the Home Office of the *Black Diaries* was a successful manoeuvre to deviate the focus from his accusations to his private life. Perhaps the existence of these *Diaries* could be still seen as a means to reflect upon the uncertainty offered by national narratives and historiographies.

To conclude, Casement is a token of the trauma inflicted by British Imperialism in Ireland, and his representations in the fictional works dealt with in this paper are if not a way to "work-thorough" these traumas, they are an effort to pay homage and retrieve his memory from obscurity. At last, this has begun to change along with the decade of commemorations of events that have started with the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising, in which, for the first time, Roger Casement has been given the spotlight

Note

- 1 This paper summarizes some of the issues dealt with in my PhD dissertation “Between ‘Angels and Demons’: Trauma in Fictional Representations of Roger Casement”, available at <<http://www.teses.usp.br/teses/disponiveis/8/8147/tde-15012016-140005/pt-br.php>>.

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