

Roger Casement in the Belgian Congo: Translation, Travel Writing and Fiction

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Abstract: *The extraordinary and at the same time controversial life of the Irish revolutionary Roger David Casement (1864-1916) who, after a long and distinguished career as a British consul in Africa and South America, turned into an Irish revolutionary, remains source of inspiration for academic research as well as for the creation of fictional texts. The aim of this project is to explore the importance of testimonial writing, such as that of Roger Casement's consular Congo Report, in revealing the trauma of colonial policy related to the rubber boom, and its representations in fiction. Furthermore, I undertake the task of translating into Portuguese Roger Casement's personal 1903 Diary and his official Report on the rubber economy in the Congo. These documents were organized in The Eyes of Another Race: Roger Casement's Congo Report and 1903 Diary (2004), edited by the Irish anthropologist Seamas O'Siochain.*

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Roger Casement and the Congo

The life journey of Roger David Casement remains source of inspiration for academic research as well as for the creation of prose, poetry, drama and critical essays. Casement was born in Sandycove, Dublin, on 1 September 1864. After the death of his mother, followed by his father's from grief, he moved in 1873 to the Casement family home, Margherintemple, in Antrim, Northern Ireland. It was, however, Edward Bannister, Casement's maternal uncle from Liverpool, who opened the doors to imperial life to him at the age of 16 by arranging a position as a clerk at the Elder Dempster Shipping Line. In 1883 Casement undertook his first journey to Boma and the Congo, and was soon employed at King Leopold II's International African Association in 1884, at the height of the dispute between fourteen European powers over the African continent, which finally culminated in the 1885 Berlin Conference. One year later, in 1886, Casement left the Congo Free State, and was subsequently hired for other postings.

Casement returned to Africa one year later, this time on the pay of the British government, to take up a posting at the Oil Rivers Protectorate in what today is known

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as Nigeria. Casement soon reached the high circles of the empire; he was held in high regard by his peers and was also known for his humane treatment of the colonized peoples. According to the anthropologist Séamas O'Síocháin, since the beginning "Casement was different from the usual colonial officials: he respected the indigenous peoples he encountered, did not carry a gun, and generally avoided violence except as a last resort" (*The Eyes of Another Race* 8). O'Síocháin affirms that by 1902, as a consequence of his colonial experience and twenty years in Africa, Casement had acquired an awareness of the mode of operation of the Congo Free State, conducted through the oppression of the natives, and the experience he gained during his investigations involving British subjects.

By May 1903, pressure from the Anti-Slavery Protection Society led to a debate owing to denunciations in the journalist Edmund Dene Morel's periodical *West African Mail*, concerning the ill treatment and mutilations committed against the Congolese rubber collectors. Meanwhile, Roger Casement was appointed British Consul in the capital of Boma and was sent to report his findings on the atrocities committed by the Belgian *Force Publique*. Upon returning to England, rushing to finish the Congo Report, Casement was introduced to E. D. Morel and they held a meeting on 24 January 1904, in order to found the Congo Reform Association, whose aim was to carry out campaigns in favour of an administrative reform in the region.

As a consequence of Casement's expertise on the workings of the British Empire and its colonies, and after spending seven years as Consul in Brazil (1906-1913), in Santos, Belem and Rio, he was appointed to join a Commission of Inquiry, this time in the Putumayo, a disputed region between Brasil, Peru and Colombia. This time, he was to report on atrocities committed to the Amazonian indigenous peoples, who worked as rubber collector for the Peruvian Amazon Company, registered in London.

Following Casement's Amazonian mission, he resigned from his imperial duties and turned into an Irish revolutionary. With financial aid from the Irish Americans, from 1914 to 1916, he sought German support for the independence of Ireland at the outbreak of the First World War. There, he asked for weapons to arm the Irish Volunteers and tried to form an Irish Brigade with prisoners of war at Limburg Camp. After returning to Ireland in April 1916 to join the Easter Rising, a rebellion that sought the independence of Ireland from the United Kingdom, he was arrested and hanged for high treason in Pentonville Prison in London, on August 3 that same year. Casement was prevented from becoming an Irish martyr, for his name was blackened as a result of the British Home Office having found in his London lodgings a set of intimate journals with homosexual content, known as Black Diaries.

Travel writing in Translation

Casement's legacy for his reports describing atrocities committed against the Congolese and Amazonian Indian rubber collectors remains overshadowed in the Transatlantic World of Britain, Ireland, Africa and South America by both his treason

and his alleged homosexuality. In order to repair this faultline in the Brazilian context, a first step was taken with the successful translation of *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement/ Diário da Amazônia de Roger Casement*(2016) into Portuguese, edited by Laura Izarra and Mariana Bolfarine, published by EDUSP.

The life of Roger Casement continues to be fruitful ground for new research in several areas of knowledge, and has been highlighted in 2016, the year of the commemoration of the centenary of the Irish Easter Rising as well as of his death. The translation of the *Amazon Journal* has been the springboard to this postdoctoral project, supervised by Dr. Laura Izarra, at the University of São Paulo, which has been ongoing since July, 2016, and is divided into two main parts.

I am currently tackling the first part of this research, which is the translation into Portuguese of the main documents that Roger Casement wrote when he was British Consul in West Africa: Casement's Congo Report and 1903 Diary. During the split PhD developed at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth in 2013, I contacted the Irish anthropologist Séamas Ó'Síocháin, main organizer of the volume *The Eyes of Another Race: Roger Casement's Congo Report and the 1903 Diary* (2004) and discussed with him the importance of translating this piece of work into Portuguese. Its relevance lies in the fact that it not only reveals the outset of the transformation Casement underwent from imperialist to revolutionary, but also because Brazil is a country that has experienced African slavery and was one of the main producers and exporters of rubber, chiefly in the first half of the twentieth century.

Ó'Síocháin's *The Eyes of Another Race* is the only edition of Casement's official report on the exploitation of rubber in the Free State of Congo, ruled by the monarch Leopold II, as well as the personal diaries of Roger Casement for the year 1903. I believe the following quotation from the historian WR Louis, in the "Introduction" to Ó'Síocháin's work, encapsulates the importance of these writings for a deeper understanding of the origins of the struggle for human rights in what was known as the "dark continent", immortalized by the novel *Heart of Darkness* (1912), by the Polish writer Joseph Conrad:

In 1903 Roger Casement fired the smouldering Congo dispute into a controversy that blazed high and hot. By providing evidence of "wholesale oppression and shocking misgovernment" in the Congo, he enabled the British Foreign Office to take a decisive stand against the Congo State. It was Sir Roger Casement who inspired E. D. Morel to found the Congo Reform Association, one of the most effective propaganda instruments in the twentieth century. The history of the Congo, unlike the history of his native Ireland, was profoundly influenced by Roger Casement. (W. R. Louis 1964, *apud* Ó'Síocháin 2003. 1)

Thus, *The Eyes of Another Race* (2004) is a travelogue which sheds light into the rubber atrocities committed in the Congo Free State ruled by Belgian absolutist monarch Leopold II.

Travel writing as genre will also be discussed, for travel accounts were the most important means of bringing out the news about remote places along the 18th and 19th centuries. Pickford and Martin (2003) explain that “travel accounts offer one of few types of literature to be considered truly global, in that they necessarily embody the industrial progress, intellectual cosmopolitanism and economic expansion that have shaped the modern era.” (n.p.) Travelogues that date from the Victorian and Edwardian Eras, when British imperialism reached its peak, were commonly written by explorers, adventurers and colonial officials in English, the language of the metropolis, as was the case of Roger Casement.

For this reason, translation is of utmost importance in travel writing, for it still has a seminal role to play in informing a wider public about unknown places, peoples and cultures. According to Michael Cronin (1999), in the case of the translation of travel accounts, the role of the translator is intensified. One of the reasons for this is that the translator ultimately takes part in the journey, and the vehicle is no longer the steam boat, train, or road, but the words on the page: “the translating agent like the traveller straddles the borderlines between two cultures.” (2) Hence, the translator acts as a mediator; consequently, profound research is required into the cultures of the travel writer (Roger Casement), of his destination (Belgian Congo) and of the country whose language the account is being translated into (Brazil).

Alongside with the translation process, I will also seek a unique angle on transatlantic relations comparing other findings of primary sources to existing bibliography. It is impossible not to associate Casement’s writings as revealing of a traumatic rift brought about by unwatched imperial practices. This leads to another facet of my research on Casement’s Congo Report and Diary which is the study of fictional representations of the historical figure of Roger Casement as a character in works of fiction that revolve around the rubber boom in the Belgian Congo, namely, *Heart of Darkness* (1902) by Joseph Conrad, *King Leopold’s Soliloquy* (1905) by Mark Twain, *King Leopold’s Ghost* (1998) by Adam Hochschild and *The Rings of Saturn*, by W.G. Sebald (1999).

The hypothesis of the second part of this research is that these works of fiction bring to light the ambivalences inherent to the figure of Roger Casement – both as agent (as a British Consul) and as a victim (as an Irishman whose native land was dominated by Britain) of imperialism – which were fundamental to his transformation from imperialist jingo into Irish nationalist. The theoretical framework is based on the ideas of cultural trauma formulated by Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, Anne Whitehead, among others. The results of this research were presented at the SPeCTReSS – Social Performances of Cultural Trauma and the Rebuilding of Solid Sovereignties & XII Symposium of Irish Studies in South America, 22-25 August 2017, “Rethinking Cultural Trauma from Transnational Perspectives”, and should be published as an article in an academic journal and/or book chapter.

Furthermore, as part of the SPeCTReSS project, I spent one month at Ruhr Universität, Bochum, and profited immensely, especially from a short stay in Belgium and a visit to the archives kept in the Royal Museum for Central Africa, in Tervuren. The Museum is known worldwide for its African masks and artefacts that date from the early twentieth century reign of Leopold II. It is one the most visited in Belgium, and at the Research Centre, I had the chance to read and photograph the archival material I needed for this ongoing research on Casement and the African Congo.

Early conclusion

To conclude, I intend to act as a textual and cultural translator of the Irish revolutionary Casement's Congo Report and the 1903 Diary, written when he was still a diligent British Consul. These texts are illuminating in terms of the way in which Casement was able to navigate through African and South American countries and cultures, and, chiefly, due to the fact that they bring to light atrocities committed against humanity, which, in spite of its different guises, still occur in the contemporary world.

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