An interview with Mario Vargas Llosa

By Angus Mitchell *

The announcement by the Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa of his intention to research and write a new novel about the Irish revolutionary, Roger Casement, locates him within a tradition stretching across the twentieth century. Both during his life and after his execution, Casement attracted considerable interest from writers, novelists, poets and playwrights. He met Joseph Conrad in the Congo and kept in touch with him for many years afterwards. Mark Twain wrote a pamphlet in support of the Congo Reform Association, an early human rights organisation that Casement co-founded with the activist E.D. Morel in 1904. Arthur Conan Doyle based a character in *The Lost World* on Casement's Amazon adventures and helped organise one of the petitions of clemency after his trial, which included the signatures of several well-known writers. William Butler Yeats sent a letter to the government in 1916 pleading for his reprieve and George Bernard Shaw penned a discarded speech from the dock. As Vargas Llosa comments in the course of the interview below, Casement 'seems to be a character whose natural environment is a very great novel, not the real world.'

The question of the reasons why Casement has remained so influential on the literary imagination is an intriguing one to consider. Joseph Conrad partly explained it when he wrote in a letter to the Scottish adventurer and writer R.B. Cunninghame Graham: 'He could tell you things! Things I've tried to forget; things I never did know.' This was a comment codifying the paradoxes that have determined Casement's life between memory and forgetting, telling and not telling, secrecy and revelation.

To anyone familiar with Varga Llosa's work there is perhaps something inevitable about his intention to write a novel based on Casement's life. Themes and tropes that appear and reappear in several of his earlier works, such as the jungle, insurgency, millenarianism, sexuality, violence, the conflict between the indigene and modernity, (trans)nationality, the excesses of power and individual betrayal are all intrinsic to Casement's history.

In this interview, the historian, Angus Mitchell, who has published extensively on Roger Casement's life and afterlife, speaks to Mario Vargas Llosa about why he is writing a book about the executed Irishman.

Mario Vargas Llosa (MVL): Let me say first that I am very grateful for the books you have sent me and I've read both of them and enjoyed them tremendously.

Angus Mitchell (AM): Well, thank you, and I've enjoyed reading your books.

MVL: (Laughing) It is reciprocal then. I particularly enjoyed very, very much your edition of *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement* (1). I think you did a wonderful job.

AM: Thank you, I hope it was useful.

MVL: The notes in particular are very illuminating about the context … a wonderful, wonderful job. Congratulations and thank you very much.

AM: Did you see the follow-up volume *Sir Roger Casement's Heart of Darkness* (2)?

MVL: Yes, absolutely. It's so rich all this material that sometimes I feel lost with all the richness of the raw material that I have … I am writing a novel so I am using this with, let's say, freedom, you know.

AM: How long have you been working on the novel?

MVL: A year and a half and I am still at the beginning, but it doesn't matter because now I am starting to enjoy it. At the beginning I was a bit lost, but now I am working with great enthusiasm.

AM: When did you first encounter Casement?

MVL: I am a great admirer of Joseph Conrad, like everybody I suppose, and I was reading a new biography on Conrad, and then, when I discovered that Roger Casement had played a very important role in the experiences of

Conrad in the Congo and that probably without the help that he received from Casement he wouldn't have written Heart of Darkness as he wrote it, I became very curious to know about Roger Casement. I started to research him and I discovered that he had been in the Amazon, he had played a very central role in the denunciation of the inequities committed during the caucho [rubber] boom period, and then I discovered that he was a fascinating character himself. All these roles he played in different political environments and then his tragic end. Then, as has usually happened with all the books I've written, the image of Roger Casement, the history of Roger Casement started to loom in my mind, in my life. It's always like that. And one day I discovered that without knowing it, I had already been working in a vague project around Roger Casement.

AM: I was struck when doing some research into your own background that you were brought up within diplomatic circles and then, in the 1980s, you were asked to lead a commission selected to investigate the atrocity of the journalists at Uchuraccay. There are obvious echoes here with Casement's life. Do you consider these points of experiential contact important?

MVL: Probably, these similar experiences made the case of Roger Casement more attractive. I should say that the experience with what happened at Uchuraccay with the killing of these eight journalists was an experience which had a tremendous impact in my life. (3) I discovered another dimension of my own country which I knew nothing about and, I suppose, this kind of experience, to be suddenly immersed in a very different cultural world and cultural environment and to discover the tremendous social, political, cultural problems, so different from the problems of the world in which I had been living before. This made me very sensitive to the kind of problems which Roger Casement faced in part of his life. He was a very tragic figure. Probably the life of Roger Casement was a very difficult life: solitude, prejudices around himself, the difficult transformation of a pro-British Irishman into a nationalist, his rejection of empire and of colonialism in his youth he thought were the tool of modernisation, of democratisation, of Westernisation from the rest of the world, is an extraordinary transformation and that he did this by himself through experiences and through his character is extremely attractive and at the same time very dramatic. No?

AM: Yes, it is an incredible story, it has almost every ingredient.

MVL: He seems to be a character whose natural environment is a very great novel and not the real world.

AM: In preparation for writing this book you travelled to the Congo. Where did you visit? What were your impressions of the Congo? Did you find any significant evidence of Casement's continued presence in the Congo?

MVL: It was only two weeks but it was so useful for me because I wanted to be in the places in which he had lived for so long. Boma and Matadi have not changed much. Matadi has grown, but still you find the traces of the colonial city. But Boma has hardly changed at all, when the administration moved to Kinshasa, Boma was completely abandoned and practically has not grown since and still you find the city with the colonial houses. It's very impressive. You can really reconstruct the environment in which Casement lived for so many years. I was lucky, I found a very interesting person Mr. Monsieur Placid-Clement, who is probably the only person in Boma interested in the past, trying to rescue, to preserve all that is a testimony of the old life of Boma and so he's a kind of librarian. The problem is there are no books in Boma. He preserves anything: papers, letters, all the papers that he can find are in his office because there is no local archive. He was very, very useful as an informant on the past in Boma.

AM: Did you find any significant evidence of Casement's continued presence?

MVL: What for me was very sad is that very few Congolese people knew about Casement. It is very sad because if there is one person who fought for years to denounce all the tragedy of the Congolese people, it was Casement and nobody remembers him. There are a few university teachers but even then they have a very vague idea of him and the importance of Casement. But the tragedy of the Congo is such

that they have forgotten the past, they are not interested in the past at all because what they see in the past are such horrors that they prefer to forget about the past, about tradition, about history. They are completely absorbed by and concentrated on the present, because the present is so atrocious you know. You can't imagine the poverty, the corruption, the violence. I thought I knew about misery, about violence in Latin America, but when you go to Congo you discover that Latin America is modernity, civilisation, by comparison to the tragedy of the Congo society. It is really indescribable … unspeakable … But at the same time it was very interesting from, let's say, a personal point of view to be exposed to this social disintegration, the disintegration of a society at all levels.

AM: It is something which Casement described in his own time and a hundred years later the same tragedy is occurring?

MVL: Absolutely, Casement's report on the Congo is still very valid, very, very valid. You still find exploitation and brutality which has disappeared from the rest of the world, even in Africa. Slavery is still a very vivid institution in Congo. What doesn't exist any more is a central power because now, with the decentralisation of the country, there is no central power. For the rest, what he described and what he saw in the Congo is still very present.

AM: How is Casement remembered in Peru? Is he reviled for his investigation, or upheld as a champion of indigenous rights, or is he simply forgotten?

MVL: In Peru he is more remembered. What is very interesting is that there is still this controversy that the *Blue Book* produced onehundred years ago is in a way still going on. (4) There are still people who say … 'well the *Blue Book* was written to favour the Colombian pretensions in the Putumayo region. Roger Casement was not fair. He was very biased' … But on the other hand you have people who admire enormously what he did, particularly in the Amazon in Iquitos. I was in Iquitos recently talking to historians there and they remember Casement with great admiration and gratitude. I think what Roger Casement did was absolutely useful at least to make visible a problem which the great majority of Peruvians ignored completely. They didn't know what was going on in the Amazon. They didn't know the kind of exploitation, brutality, atrocities which were committed by the caucho people in the Putumayoregion. Now they were very ignorant about that, so the scandal was at least very educational and instructive for the majority of the country. But still Arana is a controversial figure. There are historians who consider that in spite of everything he introduced a kind of modernity in a very primitive and prehistoric world. It is very interesting because in a way Casement is much more remembered in Peru than in Congo. All the mystery that surrounds Roger Casement in Iquitos is fascinating and no one knowswhat happened to Saldaña Rocca. You are the only person who mentions that Saldaña Rocca (5) went to Lima, lived very poorly in the capital and died. There is no way to find testimonies of the last years of Benjamin Saldaña Rocca in Lima.

Cartoon from the anti-Arana newspaper La Felpa - Arquivo Nacional, Peru

AM: Can we talk now about this novel in the context of your other work? It strikes me that there's something almost inevitable about your decision to write about Casement. You have experimented in several of your novels with multiple perspectives. *Captain Pantoja and the Secret Service*, *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* and *The Feast of the Goat* are three examples. Casement is composed of often conflicting layers of meaning and myth and in his contradictions as villain and hero, traitor and patriot, and the public and the private, there is plenty of room for

experimentation with perspectives – would you comment?

Frontpage of Iquitos-based newspaper La Sancion showing Guiseppe Garibaldi - Arcquivo Nacional, Peru

MVL: Probably the aspect of Roger Casement which for me is more and more interesting is how his life rejects all kinds of stereotypes. You cannot use stereotypes for Roger Casement because the nuances are absolutely essential in his personality, nuances and contradictions, and in this sense I think he is much more human than the usual heroes. Heroes in history or heroes in literature, in general, are of a piece. But in Roger Casement there are so many nuances in all the periods of his life, or in the roles that he played in his life, that what is really the human condition of a hero is always present in his case. In other cases, because of the stereotypes, the hero becomes so attached to the idea of a hero that he is dehumanised. He'snever been dehumanised, he's always at the level of humanity, even when he accomplished the most extraordinary achievements. On the other hand, I think it's very moving how even in the periods in which he was more celebrated, admired, he preserved a kind of modesty, a kind of distance from his public figure which is very unusual among heroes or public figures. Another fascinating aspect is that, in spite of everything that historians have discovered about him, there is also a large measure of mystery. It is difficult to tap him entirely.

AM: Several critics have discussed the intertextuality in your work, and I'm thinking here most obviously of *The War of the End of the World*. (6) Casement's own voyages of investigation were themselves shaped, some would argue, by Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Would you comment?

MVL: The subject is very different but my approach to the character is the same. I have tried to read everything I can, visiting the places he lived or that were important for his work. But I don't want to write a book of history which is disguised as a novel, not at all. I want to write a novel and so I'm going to use my imagination, my fantasy, much more than historical material, as I did with *La Guerra del Fin del Mundo*, as I did with the book on Trujillo [*The Feast of the Goat*], as I did in the book about the dictatorship of President Odría of Peru in *Conversations in the Cathedral*. I love history but I am a novelist. I want to write a novel, a book in which fantasy and imagination are more important than the historical raw material.

AM: Yes. I'd like to talk more about history and the imagination in a moment.

MVL: That is a fascinating subject, a very large subject.

AM: Casement felt he was informed by his duality, his double consciousness as an Irishman working for the British Empire. In his trajectory towards Irish separatism he was clearly motivated by his own interpretation of Irish history and his opposition to colonial authority.

MVL: There is such ambiguity, but what is interesting is how he escaped from these conditions. He worked for the British Empire and that was not an obstacle for him to be very critical about the institution which he served with such efficacy and loyalty for most of his life. At the same time he discovered all the sinister aspects of colonialism and he acted in a very coherent way working against what he considered was evil.

AM: Have you considered Casement in the light of postcolonial theory?

MVL: I think what you say in your book is absolutely true. One of his great achievements is to have understood better than most of his

contemporaries the evil aspect of colonialism and acted in a very coherent way against colonialism from the centre of colonial power itself. That is what is really unique in his case. He did it with such efficacy because when we talk about colonialism, we are talking not only of powerful countries which invade, occupy and colonise others, but we are talking about internal colonialism of the westernised Peru against the primitive Peru. He denounced this in the same way that he denounced the Belgians against the Congolese. He denounced the colonialism of the westernised *blancos* and *mestizos* against the Indians of the Amazon region, who were treated like the Congolese by the Belgians in Africa. He was very lucid in that respect and much more in the *avant garde* than the majority of his contemporaries.

AM: London was your home for many years, and you have studied and taught in British universities. Do you think this affinity allows you to empathise with Casement as an Irish patriot?

MVL: I think so. I think the years I lived in England were very important for, how can I say, my intellectual horizons. Yes, I perceived many, many things. I learned many, many things about not only literature but politics, social matters.

AM: You know there is this deep and long-standing conflict between Britain and Ireland that is lived out on a level of history - and Casement is perhaps the most complex of all the figures who interferes in that relationship.

MVL: But I think in this case you have to place Roger Casement in his times, which are essential to understanding for example the belligerency of his attitudes, and are very different today. It was very difficult in his time. He was in a very lucid minority, a very small minority, in a given moment. I think he was very courageous, very, very courageous and at the same time it was very tragic for him because for many years he had his ideas and at the same time his public figure was in total contradiction with what he thought, what he believed.

AM: The question of sexuality has played a disproportionate role in the discussion on Casement. Would it be wrong to guess that the so-called Black Diaries are central to the shaping of your own historical novel? In a recent interview in *The Guardian* you were quoted as saying that 'There is a great debate about his [Casement's] homosexuality and paedophilia that has never been resolved and probably never will be.' (7)

MVL: Let me correct this a little bit. I don't think that there is a possible doubt about Roger Casement's homosexuality. I think he was a homosexual, but what I think is still, particularly after reading what you have done in *The Amazon Journal*, that it is still possible to discuss the authenticity of the Black Diaries. You give very strong perceptions of all the contradictions between the Black Diaries and the report. But I think he was a homosexual. This is another very dramatic, tragic aspect of his life if you place homosexuality in the context of the prejudices and persecution of homosexuals.

AM: I would say that the issue of authenticity is now more about the textual rather than the sexual.

MVL: That's right, absolutely. Exactly. It is the textual which is controversial. It is very strange all these contradictions in very concrete facts in texts written almost simultaneously. I was in Oxford very recently with John Hemming (8) and we were discussing this and he was saying 'No, no, no the diaries are authentic. I assure you that they are authentic. There was no time for British Intelligence to fabricate them, there was no time.' But I answered: 'How can you explain the inaccuracies in the Black Diaries if he was writing both things at the same time. So I think this is something that can be discussed and still considered controversial. But not his homosexuality. The homosexuality was something which was another very personal element of the tragedy he lived all his life. No?

AM: Very interesting. A few years ago there was a brief exchange between two figures involved in the controversy about who could legitimately speak for Casement. The suggestion was put that only a gay man could really understand and speak for Casement. How would you respond to this point of view?

MVL: (Laughing) That is a terrible prejudice. If that was so a man couldn't write about women or Peruvians couldn't write about Europeans. No, no, I think literature is a demonstration of how this is all absolutely ridiculous prejudice. A writer

can write about every type of human and character, because there is a common denominator which is more important behind the sexual orientation, the cultural tradition, the language, the races. No, I believe in the unity of the human kind, I think literature is the best demonstration of the universal experiences that can be understood and shared among people of very different extractions, very different identities and other levels of life including, of course, sex.

AM: That's very reassuring. We touched a little earlier on the relationship between fact and fiction and history and imagination. Your interview in *The Guardian* also quoted you as saying that you were 'not looking for historical precision but for something to shake me out of my insecurity'.

MVL: (Laughs)

AM: Moreover, in a recent letter explaining your intentions for the novel you wrote how you were 'writing a novel in which fantasy and imagination will play a more important role than historical memory.' What value do you give historical memory in the context of this story?

MVL: I think what is important when you use history in writing a novel is to reach the level where all experiences are an expression of the human condition. Not the local or regional characteristics, but on the contrary, what is general, something that transcends these limitations or conditions let's say *Ulysses*, something that can be understood by people of very different cultures. I read *Ulysses* for the first time when I was in Lima and I hadn't been in touch with other cultures and I was moved, deeply, deeply moved by Leopold Bloom and the Dublin of Joyce. When you read *War and Peace* you don't need to be a Russian or a contemporary of Napoleon to be deeply moved by the story that Tolstoy told. I think that this is the importance of literature as something that makes clear what is common, what is shared among the great variety of experiences, of traditions, of customs. I think that this is what you should try to achieve when you write a novel based on history: this common denominator in which we recognise each other even if we speak in very different ways or we believe in very different things. So that is what I've tried to do. I know that I am not Irish so probably in my novel Irish people will find many things that they do not recognise, but I hope the novel overall will justify the inaccuracies.

AM: Many distinguished writers have touched Casement's life in different ways: Joseph Conrad, Arthur Conan Doyle, George Bernard Shaw, James Joyce, W. B. Yeats, W. G. Sebald, to name a few …

MVL: This is one of the great things of Irish literature, universality. Even when Ireland was still very provincial, [it could] produce these dreamers - the great poets and the great novelists who were so universal. That's an example to follow!

AM: Conversely, historians have steered a wide berth away from him as a subject. Despite the size of Casement's surviving archive and his implacable pursuit of 'facts' and 'truth', he appeals more to the literary imagination than to archive-based research. Why do you think this is?

MVL: Probably because in order to really understand Casement you have to use as much research and academic discipline as fantasy or imagination. Without the fantasy and a lot of imagination you don't reach a character like Casement. He was very exceptional, he was extraordinary in the variety of his roles, of his experiences, there is so much shadow, I think you need a lot of imagination and fantasy and probably that is why he is so appealing for literary people.

AM: Which historical novelists do you admire?

MVL: Tolstoy. I am a great admirer of Tolstoy and the nineteenth-century novelists, Stendhal, Victor Hugo. Contemporary novelists who have written a lot about socio-historical matters. For example, I admire André Malraux very, very much and his novel *La Condition humaine* which is a masterwork, but very neglected by people because of political reasons. (9) Malraux was a Gaulliste, and his work has been neglected, but I think *La Condition humaine* is a masterwork as a political novel. That is something very difficult to write: a political novel.

AM: I've heard it said of your own work that you use writing in order to challenge social inadequacies, oppression and political

corruption and to encourage active, critical citizenship. Has the telling of the Casement story helped you do this and how?

MVL: Yes, I think he is a fantastic character to denounce the selfishness of people, who are unable to see more than self-interest. He was a very generous man, his life was orientated around great goals: social, political, cultural, and he was absolutely ready to sacrifice his own personal interests. It's very moving how he spends all his money on humanitarian organisations, cultural organisations. On the other hand he was a victim of all kind of prejudices and if you want to describe in a very contemporary way the stupidity of religious, political, sexual prejudice, you have a fantastic example in Roger Casement. On the other hand he was human, he also had his own limitations. I think you can discuss in a given moment the way in which his nationalism became a cultural nationalism and he was restricted in a way that can be, I think, criticised. He was not a superman, he was a human being, he was a very extraordinary man but he was not a superman. I think that this is the aspect I would like to emphasise in my book.

AM: Señor Vargas Llosa thank you very much.

MVL: I've been very pleased to talk to you.

Angus Mitchell

Notes

* Angus Mitchell has lectured on campuses in the US and Ireland and continues to publish on the life and afterlife of Roger Casement. He lives in Limerick.

1 Angus Mitchell (ed.), *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement* (London & Dublin, 1997).

2 Angus Mitchell (ed.), *Sir Roger Casement's Heart of Darkness* (Dublin, 2003).

3 On 26 January 1983, eight Peruvian journalists, most of them from Lima, and their guide, set out for the rural community of Uchuraccay, a remote Andean village in the province of Ayacucho, to investigate reports of human rights abuses. Soon after their arrival, they were murdered, apparently by the villagers themselves. Mario Vargas Llosa was asked to head up a commission to investigate the tragedy.

4 The Blue Book refers to the official government publication containing Casement's reports on his official investigation and interviews with the Barbadians recruited by the company to work on the rubber stations. Miscellaneous no.8 (1912) *Correspondence respecting the treatment of British Colonial Subjects and Native Indians employed in the collection of rubber in the Putumayo district* [Cd. 6266]. Publication of this report had a significant impact on investment in the Amazon region.

5 Benjamin Saldaña Rocca was a socialist agitator who lived and worked in Iquitos and galvanised the first protest against Julio César Arana and his rubber-gathering regime through his two newspapers, *La Felpa* and *La Sanción*. Nearly complete editions of both newspapers are held in the Bodleian Library, Oxford N.2343 b.10 (1). In 1908 Saldaña Rocca was forced to leave Iquitos and went to live in Lima, where he died destitute in 1912. His efforts, however, had a great influence on Walt Hardenburg, who awakened interest in the Putumayo atrocities in London in 1909.

6 Published in 1984, *The War of the End of the World* is Vargas Llosa's imaginative interpretation of the Canudos rebellion which occurred in the backlands of Brazil at the end of the nineteenth century and inspired one of Brazil's most lauded novels, *Os Sertões* (Rebellion in the Backlands) by the Brazilian writer Euclydes da Cunha.

7 *The Guardian* (London), 4 October 2008.

8 Historian of the Amazon, John Hemming, has written the key popular works on Amazon history. For his contribution to the Casement controversy see 'Roger Casement's Putumayo Investigation' in Mary E. Daly (ed.), *Roger Casement in Irish and World History* (Dublin, 2005).

9 Andre Malraux, *La Condition Humaine* (1933) was translated initially as *Storm in Shanghai* (1934) and later as *Man's Estate* (1948).