

**“When the gaze must not be averted:  
The testament for humanity in the universality of  
Roger Casement’s humanitarian vision”**

President Michael D. Higgins<sup>1</sup>

*Canciller Luna Mendoza, embajadoras, embajadores, distinguidos invitados, amigos y amigas,*

*Es para mí un honor y un placer estar aquí en Perú, en esta hermosa e histórica ciudad de Lima. Quiero agradecer al Canciller Ricardo Luna Mendoza sus amables palabras de presentación, a la Doctora Scarlett O’Phelan Godoy por su valiosa presentación histórica, y a todos ustedes por su calurosa acogida. Esta es la primera visita de un Presidente irlandés a Perú, y espero que esta visita contribuya a profundizar los lazos de amistad entre nuestros dos países.*

It is my great pleasure to start what is my third visit to Latin America as Irish President, here in Lima, the capital of Peru, a country which harbours so many expressions of civilisations, so many cultural and natural treasures. The struggles, aspirations and achievements of the peoples of this continent are ones that are connected to so many of the Irish in exile and their descendants.



Fig. 1. President Michael D. Higgins delivering his keynote Address at the Peruvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Lima, Peru, Thursday 9 February 2017.

<sup>1</sup> This is the transcript of the keynote address delivered at the Peruvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Lima, Peru, Thursday 9 February 2017 by President Michael D. Higgins.

I remember vividly my own first visit to Peru, in 1988. I was one of a small group of Irish parliamentarians who were on our way home from Santiago de Chile, where we had observed the historic Chilean referendum of 1988 that put an end to the military regime of Augusto Pinochet. As the first international observer to arrive in Chile, I became known as “*Observador Uno*”, and Ricardo Lagos allocated me to Punta Arenas, where I witnessed the *Plebiscito*.

In Lima I stayed in “*El Monton*” with the Columban fathers, an Irish missionary society who have been present in Peru since 1951 and who, in those years of the late 1980s, were doing their best to support communities of the poor and those families affected by the economic policies of the day.

Three decades on, so much has changed in Peru, and across the continent. As the pendulum has swung away from military dictatorships towards different forms of democratic inclusion and participation, millions of women, children and men have been lifted out of poverty. Literacy rates for both men and women have increased. Latin American countries have led the way in introducing in their respective national constitutions innovative provisions to protect the natural environment.

Those three decades have also witnessed a progressive increase of political, cultural, academic, scientific and commercial exchanges between our two countries, Ireland and Peru. I was delighted to learn from His Excellency Claudio de la Puente Ribeyro, as he presented his credentials to me in November of last year, that Peru will soon open an embassy in Dublin. Today it is for me an honour to be the first President of Ireland to visit the Republic of Peru. I very much hope that such expressions of political goodwill can contribute to strengthening the warm friendship that exists between our two nations. I hope that we will, together, open meaningful avenues for cooperation, and build novel, and much needed, solidarities – of a global, regional and bilateral kind – for the shared future of our peoples on what is our beautiful but fragile planet.

It is, of course, on this continent that an old wisdom existed, built on the connection between ecology, social existence, modes of economic subsistence, music and belief systems. The recent international commitments on climate change and sustainability will thus represent for many South Americans, and especially in Peru, a recall of an old symmetry upon which an insatiable colonisation was destructively visited.

*Los Irlandeses somos parte de esta historia, como víctimas y también como participantes del sistema colonial, que tejió muchos de los lazos transatlánticos entre Irlanda y América Latina. Nuestros antepasados a su vez participaron en el proceso de descolonización del continente, y las huellas de estos vínculos históricos se encuentran en todas partes de América Latina, también aquí en Perú.*

It is always very moving for Irish visitors to this beautiful continent to encounter monuments, buildings and streets with names that bear testimony to the past experiences and contributions of Irish people in these lands. Those names are often those of Irish people, who, after the conquest of Ireland by

Britain, came to Latin America through the transatlantic networks of Europe's Catholic monarchies, and notably through the Irish brigades in the Spanish army.

Many of those Irish people spent their lives soldiering or trading abroad on behalf of the Catholic powers of continental Europe, often harbouring the hope that those powers would, one day, intervene to free their homeland from British rule, or, for some, that the military experience they had gained would prove useful in undoing colonising dispossession and achieving independence. For most it was, too, an exercise in achieving self-worth and recognition in an atmosphere where they were not perceived as lesser.

One such man was Ambrosio (Ambrose) O'Higgins, to whose burial site I had the opportunity of paying my respects on my way here this afternoon. Born in Ireland's County Sligo, Ambrosio O'Higgins arrived to the Spanish Americas in 1756. After several years spent as an itinerant trader, he enrolled in the Spanish Imperial Service and he undertook what was a huge achievement at the time, namely the crossing of the Andes Mountains on a mission to establish a reliable postal service between the colony of La Plata on the East and the "Capitanía General de Chile."

This was a harrowing journey for the Irishman, carried out in the midst of winter. Having courageously and successfully completed his mission, Ambrosio O'Higgins exercised various eminent administrative and military functions, before he eventually became Viceroy of Peru. Ambrosio O'Higgins' contributions to Peruvian life included a number of decrees which, although they stopped well short of adequate recognition of indigenous rights, or did not envisage full independence, were, in the context of their times, innovative and progressive.

Many of the fellow Irishmen of Ambrosio O'Higgins and their descendants would of course become involved with a host of uprisings and nationalist movements throughout Latin America and the Caribbean – in Mexico, Chile, Bolivia, Colombia, Argentina, Brazil, Puerto Rico, Cuba and, of course, Peru – as thousands of Irish men enlisted in the patriot armies campaigning against Spanish rule between 1817 and 1824.

Ambrosio's own son – Bernardo O'Higgins – did not just play a prominent role in the Chilean independence movement, he also participated in the liberation of Peru. The story of Bernardo's youth, travails and achievements, of how he did, in his turn, undertake an incredible crossing of the Andes from Mendoza into Central Chile, and of his life ended in exile on the Peruvian side of the Andes, is one of immense courage and endurance. We can think, too, of John Thomond O'Brien, from County Wicklow, who fought alongside General José de San Martín, or of Daniel Florence O'Leary, a native of Cork who was aide-de-camp to Simón Bolívar and has remained an important figure in the national memory of Venezuela and Colombia.

Importantly, Irish and Latin American people were also united by bonds of imagination, a mutual sympathy for their respective struggles for freedom.

Indeed, at the same time that a sense of distinctive nationhood was taking shape in Spain's American possessions, in the early nineteenth century, Irish patriots were challenging the colonial relationship between Ireland and Britain, thus allowing for multiple solidarities to be forged between Irish and South American nationalists.

Those manifold bonds of solidarity between our peoples – both experienced and imagined – are documented in a fine exhibition entitled “The Irish in Latin America”, which I had the pleasure of opening two weeks ago in Ireland, and which will be displayed next week in Cuba, and later in the year here in Peru (DFA 2016).

Such reminders of our past links are important. They provide a well of potent memories: memories of joint struggles and aspirations, of hopes shared and dreams waiting to be taken up again – a well from which we can draw as we seek to respond to the challenges of our own times. Indeed, I believe that the best part of our past lies in those emancipatory promises whose trajectory was interrupted, but which continue to offer themselves to our present, begging to be realised. The sediment of those possibilities imagined, but yet to be realised, is what remains after the water of memory has been drawn.

The man whose memory I want to evoke for you this afternoon, Roger Casement, was the bearer of such a promise of a better world, with its necessary accompanying human rights and the recognition of human dignity as the source of those rights. His vision, built on experiences in Africa, Latin America and Ireland, was of a non-exploitative civilisation, in which the abuses tolerated by the law of the strongest would have no place, in which each nation would be enabled to shape its own destiny, according to its particular history and culture – and of a civilisation in which the dignity and the rights of indigenous peoples, including their right to live peaceful and harmonious lives in their ancestral lands, would be respected.

Roger Casement's voice is one that continues to echo today with Irish and Peruvian people, and beyond, with all of us who inhabit this vulnerable and profoundly interdependent world – a world in which the issue of indigeneity is arising again, as we witness, once again, the destructive activities of extractive industries, but also as new hopes are forming in the wake of the recent agreements on climate change and sustainable development.

Roger Casement's voice is the voice of an Irishman whose awareness of his own identity as a member of a colonised people enabled him to forge bonds of empathy, first with the enslaved rubber workers of the Belgian Congo, and then with the brutalised Indigenes of the Putumayo region. It is also the voice of a sensitive observer whose deep regard for the particularities of small cultures and indigenous ways of life was the wellspring for his defence of the universal values of justice, freedom and human dignity.

This combination of influences, and deep instincts of the heart too, in Roger Casement's gaze, its universalism and concern for the particular in the space

and time of peoples is what continues to speak to our humanity, across the decades and the distances between continents.

This engaged gaze and this courageous, uninhibited voice are a compass for all of us, academics, activists, administrators, diplomats and policy makers as we endeavour to craft in our respective countries development paths that will enable all of our citizens to flourish.

My hope is that today's evocation of the life and work of Roger Casement may also become a grounding inspiration for energetic and deepened relations between Ireland and Peru, and become a driver for the expanding spheres of our cooperation and mutual interest.

Indeed the figure of Roger Casement has already been a source of inspiration for the great Peruvian writer and Nobel Laureate, Mario Vargas Llosa, as evidenced in his *El Sueño del Celta* (2010), a captivating fictional biography that retraces the complex journey of a man who was at once an Irish revolutionary, an outstanding but contrarian diplomat in the British Foreign Office, and one of the great humanitarians of the turn of the last century.

In 2012, I had the pleasure of welcoming Mario Vargas Llosa to *Áras an Uachtaráin*, the home of the President of Ireland, to mark the translation of his novel into English, as *The Dream of the Celt*.

In December 2015, as we, in Ireland, were getting ready to commemorate the centenary of the Easter Rising of 1916, a milestone on the road to Irish independence, I presented Mario Vargas Llosa with the Presidential Distinguished Service Award, a distinction usually reserved to people of Irish descent, in recognition of his contribution to casting a light on Roger Casement's courageous campaigns in defence of human life and the rights of the disenfranchised.

If Roger Casement's voice continues to call out to us, it is probably in part because the times he lived through were ones that have profound resonance with our own. Often referred to as the "first globalisation", it was an era when an insatiable capital moved freely across the globe, when vast territorial expanses were opened up to industrial exploitation, with devastating impact on what had been complex civilisations, and when the flow of goods circulating within and between Europe's huge colonial empires increased dramatically. It was a time, too, of great migration, which saw tens of millions of Europeans leave the old continent to seek their fortunes in other hemispheres.<sup>2</sup>

The turn of the twentieth century was also marked by Europe's rapid industrial boom and a race for extractive rubber resources that resulted in the violent transformation of extensive swathes of latex-bearing tropical forest in the interior regions of Africa and Latin America.

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<sup>2</sup> It is estimated that roughly 60 million people left Europe during the period 1860-1914.

This was most intensely felt by the indigenous people living along the basins of the two largest rivers feeding into the Atlantic: The Congo and the Amazon. Indeed, the globalised networks of European commercial expansionism, and the associated process of internal colonisation in the new South American Republics, were predicated upon a system of enslavement and exploitation of the local populations, of which the so-called "Congo Free State" and the frontier region of the north-west Amazon, were two hubs.

As Angus Mitchell, whose research on Casement's notebooks and photographic record has been an invaluable contribution, has put it:

Market demand for rubber resulted in the violent invasions and transformation of extensive regions of tropical forest, which were quickly turned into slave kingdoms.

(Mitchell 2010: 14)

Angus Mitchell identifies three struggles in Roger Casement's formation, one in Africa, one in South America and one in Connemara, the Typhus epidemic, and it is the connection of these three experiences that gives him his concept of, and commitment to, indigeneity.

Roger Casement was a witness to the crimes perpetrated in both regions. But he was never a passive witness. He did not avert his gaze from those atrocities committed in the pursuit of profit and greed, yet rationalised in the name of progress and civilisation. And it is important, today, that we recall the detail of those sombre aisles of global history, a history in which we all share.

Having worked for the British Foreign Service in Africa for just over a decade, Roger Casement embarked, in 1903, on a journey by steamboat to remote areas of the Upper Congo, where he gathered convincing evidence that the collection of rubber in the territory under the direct control of King Leopold of Belgium was widely associated with extortions of taxes, forced labour, murder and mutilation of the enslaved natives, and an overall depopulation of the area.

It was a system of cruelty and oppression that worked for the personal benefit of King Leopold and his favourite concessionaires. Casement's report on his findings, published as a White Paper in 1904, provided a "formidable indictment" of a colonial architecture based on the crudest violations of human rights. This report, combined with Casement's influence with key opinion makers of his day, contributed to a galvanising of international pressures that eventually led to a reform of the administration of the Congo.

A few short years later, still working for the British Foreign Office, Roger Casement arrived in Brazil where he was appointed to the position of Consul. In 1910, he embarked on a voyage to officially investigate allegations of crimes being committed by a large rubber company operating in the Putumayo area, on the border between Brazil, Peru and Colombia. Headed by Julio César Arana, this company, which was originally called "Casa Arana", had by then

been transformed into the “Peruvian Amazon Company”, partly funded by British capital and with headquarters in London.

According to Colombian anthropologist Juan Alvaro Echeverri, the impact of the Casa Arana regime on the Putumayo Indians, whom it coerced into collecting wild rubber and running the rubber stations, was enormous (Echeverri 2010, pp. 49-64). The region's Indian population was reduced to perhaps less than a tenth of its size between 1900 and 1930, and the Indians' social, political and ceremonial organisation was very severely shattered. This raises an immense issue in terms of the ethics of memory. How, and by what means, with what intentions, should descendants of such indigenous peoples remember, recall, heal themselves, and prepare for a future not crippled by the past? Dr. Echeverri's work is a real contribution on such an issue.



Fig. 2. President Michael D. Higgins (centre) and Irish Ambassador to Mexico Sonja Hyland (extreme right), meet with *caciques* from the Putumayo. (From: *El Tiempo*, 15 February 2017.)

As in the Congo, Roger Casement was a witness to those crimes committed in the depth of the tropical forest. Once again, he chose not to avert his gaze from the exploited, mutilated, tortured, raped and starved bodies of the enslaved people. He mobilised all the means at his disposal to document and put a halt to those atrocities – not just by using his pen and influence, but also by painstakingly compiling witness statements, writing letters, organising hearings in London, and arranging meetings in Washington, but also by taking photos and sending them, annotated by his own hand, to people of influence around the world. Those photos, of which some of us have just seen a sample in the exhibition currently on display in the Centro Cultural Inca Garcilaso, contributed to ensuring that the Putumayo would not remain a “sealed book” for Casement's contemporaries – or indeed for us today.

There was, by then, in his maturing moral vision, not just determination in Roger Casement's letters. If I may quote from Roger Casement's own words – words that indicate the profoundly empathetic interest he took in the Indigenes of the Putumayo:

All that was once his [the Indian's] has been taken away from him – his forest, his home, his domestic affections even – nothing that God and Nature gave him is indeed left to him, save his fine, healthy body capable of supporting terrible fatigue, his shapely limbs and fair, clear skin – marred by the lash and scarred by execrable blows.

His manhood has been lashed and branded out of him. I look at the big, soft-eyed faces, averted and downcast, and I wonder where that Heavenly Power can be that for so long allowed these beautiful images of Himself to be thus defaced and shamed.

(Mitchell 1997: 335)

Roger Casement *continúa describiendo a los caucheros y sus acólitos:*

One looks then at the oppressors – vile cut-throat faces; grim, cruel lips and sensual mouths, bulging eyes and lustful . . . and it is this handful of murderers who, in the name of civilisation and of a great association of English gentlemen, are the possessors of so much gentler and better flesh and blood.

(Mitchell 1997: 335)

The report which Roger Casement completed for the Foreign Office was published as a parliamentary Blue Book in July 1912 and contributed, once again, to exposing the brutal oppression of rubber workers in the depths and darkness of the ransacked tropical forest. This publication stirred diplomatic circles and public opinion worldwide, causing the collapse of Arana's Peruvian Amazon Company the following year.

Roger Casement's official reports on the Congo and the Putumayo are not the only written sources in which he registered the sinister underpinnings of the global capitalist system of his day. The journal kept by Casement during his time in the Amazon is a further, more directly-written account of what he was witnessing, and thus provides an invaluable source from which to grasp the workings of a predatory system rooted in the appropriation of natural resources without any regard for the rights and life of the indigenous people within that ecosystem.

Angus Mitchell, who edited Roger Casement's Amazon Journal – and to whom, I repeat again, we owe a huge debt of gratitude for his research of many crucial aspects of Roger Casement's work – has shown how this journal throws light onto the mechanisms of colonial exploitation, “showing the criminal interdependencies which facilitate the instruments of fear, violence, secrecy and intimidation to subjugate and divide indigenous society” (Mitchell 2010, p. 16).

According to Angus Mitchell, not only does this Amazon Journal express Roger Casement's uncompromising interrogation of colonial reality, his outrage at the atrocities committed by the local taskmasters and, by association,

their commercial accomplices back in London, but it also demonstrates a deep-seated interest in indigenous culture that was rooted in Casement's own, and somewhat idealised, conception of Irish native culture.

In 1913, Roger Casement began to establish a connection between the fate of the Amazon indigenes and the plight of Connemara islanders who were suffering from an outbreak of typhus. Such identification of "Irishness" with indigeneity can be interpreted as integral to the formation of a wider anti-colonial awareness in the revolutionary Ireland of the early twentieth century.

That wider anti-colonial awareness had found expression, for example, in the establishment by historian Alice Stopford Green, Douglas Hyde, and a few others, of an Irish African Society, and it also expressed itself during the first decades of Irish independence, through Ireland's advocacy on behalf of colonised peoples in such fora as the League of Nations or the United Nations.

To this day, the defence of human rights, the fight against global hunger, and a commitment to disarmament and international peace remain cornerstones of Ireland's foreign policy.

The significance of Roger Casement's observations is recognised by contemporary anthropological writing. For example, Michael Taussig, Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University, in his now classic study of the "culture of terror" and "space of death" created by the rubber barons in the Putumayo river area of present-day Columbia, has also referred to Casement's tendency to equate the sufferings of the Irish with those of the Indians, and to see in the pre-imperialist history of both a culture more humane than that of their "civilising" masters (1984, pp. 467-497). After all, Casement himself had written of how his insight into the sufferings of the Congo's enslaved rubber workers stemmed from his own capacity to look at their tragedy – I quote:

with the eyes of another race – of a people once hunted themselves, whose ... estimate of life was not of something eternally to be praised at its market 'price'.

(Letter to Alice Stopford Green, 20 April 1907: NLI MS10,464)

Roger Casement's sensitivity to the plight of the Indigenes – a sensitivity rarely found indeed in a person of his epoch and upbringing – was thus unquestionably informed by his sense of his own identity as an Irishman. This experience of inhumanity in the colonial periphery did, in turn, reinforce Roger Casement's commitment to Ireland's ancient Gaelic culture and the cause of Irish freedom. This complex set of experiences, moral convictions and emancipatory aspirations finally drove him to articulate a full-blown rejection of the values and assumptions of free-trading empire he had willingly and diligently served for many years.

Roger Casement was at the peak of his career and reputation, having been knighted by King George V, when he resigned from the British Consular

service, in 1913. His involvement with the plans for an armed rebellion in Ireland, in the midst of World War I, led to his eventual capture, trial for high treason, and execution by hanging in the early morning of 3<sup>rd</sup> August, 1916, in London's Pentonville Prison.

*Queridos Amigos,*

Roger Casement has rightly been described as one of the founders of the modern human rights discourse. A worthy successor to outstanding figures from previous centuries, such as Bartolomé de Las Casas or Antonio Vieira, he championed the rights of indigenous peoples and the principle of the irreducibility of human dignity before such concepts came into widespread usage.

Those are the figures History remembers – compelling voices who dared to speak up against the misery generated by the ruthless commercial practices of their time. Voices that still speak to us, across the centuries. For me, it is the capacity to go to the root of the assumptions that justified the system that distinguishes Roger Casement. “Assumptions-testing” must be at the core of pluralist scholarship in any progressive system, not to speak of democracy.

At this beginning of a new century, the fundamental questions Roger Casement raised about power and human rights, about the rights of indigenous communities, and about the rules guiding foreign policy, development strategies and international trade – those questions continue to challenge and unsettle us but to which for too many people if I might borrow Pope Francis' phrase, “we have become anaesthetised”.

I will, if I may quote one last time Casement's own words – words he couched on his way back from the Putumayo, and words that resound powerfully, I believe, with our present ensnarement within a distorted, hyper-financialised version of capitalism. Roger Casement asked:

Has our modern commercialism, our latter-day company promoting – whose motto would seem to be that a Director may pocket the proceeds without perceiving the process – no part in this enterprise of horror and shame?

[The Aranas] found English men and English finance prepared without question to accept their Putumayo 'estates' and their numerous native 'labourers' at a glance, a glance at the annually increasing output of rubber. Nothing beyond that was needed. The rubber was there. How it was produced, out of what hell of human suffering, no one knew, no one asked, no one suspected. Can it be that no one cared?

(Mitchell 1997: 504)

Can it be that, nowadays, no one cares about that most dangerous of all immunities, the immunity sought once again by morally irresponsible, but powerful, commercial interests in sectors such as mining, oil drilling and

logging? Can it be that no one objects to industrial strategies predicated upon the seizure of land and the appropriation of natural resources, notwithstanding the rights of those whose ancestors were caretakers of the forests and the great rivers, and who are dependent today on those resources to preserve their particular ways of life? Can it be that no one wishes to recall the names of those environmentalists and indigenous activists who are murdered year after year in the name of greed and a new rush to the forest, this time for gold, and oil, and gas, and minerals, and exotic timber?

Let us not, dear friends, avert our gaze from sites of plunder, exploitation and degradation. Let us not abandon any of our communities, however remote they may be from centres of power, to raw economic forces. Let us draw, instead, on the best of our scholarship, on the best of our science and technology, and on our citizens' abiding capacity for mobilisation to imagine, defend, and implement new solutions for the future of the forest and its indigenous communities. Let us build on the real possibilities that exist for new forms of international and regional cooperation, so as to craft, together, a more just international order.

I am not suggesting that this is an easy task. Issues of development are extremely complicated matters, requiring complex balancing of choices between the generation of material wealth, the urgency of the needs of poorer citizens, and the long-term imperatives of environmental sustainability and the rights of indigenous people.

We know, however, that the current patterns of distorted trade, insatiable consumption and inordinate extraction of natural resources are not sustainable. Not only is it urgent, but it is necessary, and possible, to devise alternative models of development. It is possible for governments to demand of companies that they respect their ethical and legal obligations. It is possible, and crucial, to protect the rights to land of indigenous peoples and subsistence farmers, including the women among them. As the great Peruvian poet, César Vallejo, said: "*Hay, hermanos, muchísimo que hacer*" (1939).

Yes, there is, brothers and sisters of this vulnerable planet, very much to do. And there are, also, many reasons to be hopeful. In pursuing our immense task of reconstruction for this new century, we are fortunate to be able to rely on public support for that rich framework of human rights to which Roger Casement made a pioneering contribution.

Further, in their efforts to protect the rights of indigenous people, governments can build on a robust national, regional and international legal corpus, from the emblematic study of the United Nations' Special Rapporteur, José Martínez Cobo in 1972, to the important consultation mechanisms enshrined in the International Labour Organisation's *Convention 169*, down to the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the tenth anniversary of which we will celebrate this year. These are instruments we must all work to see put in action.

Much can be achieved, too, within the new framework for Global Sustainable Development, which comprises several targets specifically dedicated to indigenous people, and on the recent advancements secured by the global climate talks.

The Peruvian government has led the way in that regard, by reiterating, at several junctures during those negotiations, its commitment to preserving a total of 54 million hectares of forest and to reducing its rate of net deforestation to zero by 2021, while also committing to increasing the area of land titled to indigenous groups.

There are so many promising initiatives in-the-making on this continent. I am thinking, for example, of the suggestion of creating a vast protected area of biological and cultural diversity connecting the Andes, the Amazon and the Atlantic, a corridor for humanity now and in the future, in which the indigenous people and their traditional knowledge would play an important role.

Leaders from all over the world can draw inspiration from such an example of cooperation between eight countries, that builds on existing projects, programmes and transboundary agreements and re-articulates them within the wider framework of the new Sustainable Development Goals and its related climate agenda.

I believe that the global discussion underway on climate and the environment presents indigenous communities with a historic opportunity to make their voices heard. As Eduardo Galeano put it in an interview from 2001:

[Indigenous people] have suffered the seven plagues of Egypt, and many more. But they have perpetuated traditions coming from their ancient times; and these voices from the past speak to the future of all humankind.

(Manrique 2001)

Indigenous communities, from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego, find themselves on the frontline of global climate change; I want to extend, on behalf of the people of Ireland, my sympathy to all those who have suffered in Peru from the recent floods. The ongoing discussions on the future of our planet present all of us with an important opportunity, and a responsibility, to rethink our relation to our natural environment.

These invitations constitute a challenge to the dualist and insufficient intellectual constructs bequeathed to us by Western philosophy, that might have led to the separation between culture and nature, between mind and matter, between the spiritual and the bodily. Old patterns of wisdom, embodied skills, and vernacular knowledges, if recovered, can offer some healing of those harmful separations as we seek to return the human to a meaningful place *within* nature, and to articulate a new ethic of responsibility binding together all those, human and non-human, who dwell on earth.

Finally, much hope and inspiration can be derived from the processes of memory healing currently underway amongst indigenous communities who are the descendants of those who were brutalised by the Arana regime. Colombian anthropologist Juan Alvarro Echeverri, to whose work I have referred earlier, related the story of a group of Muinane Indians, comprising both elders and youths who, in 1993, undertook a journey back to their ancestral lands in what is now called the district of Matanzas, but used to be known to the Indians as “Hill of the Wild Cacao Tree” (Echeverri 2010).

This region has been part of Colombia ever since the 1920s, when Peru ceded to Colombia the territories north of the Putumayo River. In the early 1990s, most of the Muinane elders were the children of those who had directly suffered slavery and slaughter, and they had never been back to that area where the malocas [longhouses] of their forbears rested abandoned.

What comes across in the words and invocations – addressed by those Muinane elders to the spirits of their murdered ancestors believed to be still inhabiting the area – are not thoughts of revenge, not even a willingness to recall the detail of the unspeakable crimes they suffered, but a generous and forward-looking desire to heal amputated memories by introducing the ancestors to their beautiful descendants – “the bones of their bones” – and by nurturing the immense potential for life embodied in that generation of educated, resourceful and interested young people.

As one of our most valued Irish poets, Derek Mahon, put it just a few years ago:

It is now time to go back at last  
Beyond irony and slick depreciation  
Past hedge and fencing to a clearer vision  
Time to create a future from the past

(Mahon 2016)

*Amigos*, may we, like the Muinane, discard for all time the “basket of darkness” encountered by Roger Casement in the Putumayo, and like the Muinane take from the “basket of life” and sow, together, the seeds of a new ethics for our times – the ethics of caring, nurturing work carried out in responsibility and joyous celebration for the sake of future generations.

*Muchísimas gracias.*

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