



*Pleasantries we exchange  
over the wrapping of purchases  
obscure the knowledge of causes:  
no butcher without butchery.*

(“The Usurpers Habit”, Ciaran O’Driscoll, 2001)

‘Putumayo’ is a retelling of the story of Roger Casement’s work investigating the list of horrific abuses of the indigenous people by the corporations and their employees that controlled the rubber trade, specifically by the Peruvian Amazon Company (PAC). For centuries indigenous people had been forced into unpaid labor by waves of extractive business. The PAC became notorious because it was registered in Britain in 1908 and had a British board of directors and numerous stockholders benefitting from this savage form of capitalism, thereby directly implicating British individuals in this abusive system of resource extraction. The operation was directed by the rubber baron, Julio Cesar Arana, who exacted ruthless control over his workers, subjected them to near starvation, severe physical abuse, gratuitous murder and systematic violence that included the rape of women and children by the station managers. The American anthropologist, Michael Taussig (1986) coined the phrase ‘space of death’ to describe the arena of this extreme form of colonial capitalism that the communities of this area had to endure.

In recent years, some understanding of this appalling tragedy has started to re-emerge, especially among those communities who were devastated by this moment of violent invasion. After decades of silence, surviving members of the traumatised communities are starting to tell their ancestral stories as a way of drawing attention to the continuing cycles of exploitation that determine their daily lives. On the wall of the old rubber station in La Chorrera, in the very building where the PAC once had its headquarters, there is now this very graphic mural depicting the remembered past (See Fig. 1).

For several years I had been aware of this desperate tragedy that has such a powerful resonance for the Irish because of the intervention of the Irish revolutionary, Roger Casement. To mark the centenary of both his Amazon voyages in 1910 and 1911, and of the 1916 Rising, and as a way of recovering our connection to this tragedy, I charted the story as it appeared to me.



Fig. 1. Detail of the mural, *El Grito de los Hijos del Tabaco, la Coca y la Yuca Dulce* by Rember Yahuacarni, a painter and writer from the Huitoto community, a people whose cosmos was particularly devastated by the operations of the Peruvian Amazon Company (Yahuacarni 2014).

Using drawing, some collaged images and hand-written texts, the print highlights a list of elements which I associate with the story; thus, this piece creates a sort of simple map which alludes to imperial maps, and most notably ‘Imperial Federation – map of the world showing extent of the British Empire 1886’, which included decorative symbolic images of conquest. Imperial maps – such as this one – were instruments of power and control, facilitating the naming, abstraction and domination of those being mapped (See Fig. 2). Yet there are ever opportunities for counter-mapping, a process of developing alternative narratives and repositories of information and representation. Mapping is a way of talking, about places, stories and events. Maps, to paraphrase Jim Savage (2007), can operate through many ‘voices’: combining the diagrammatic with the pictorial, words with imagery, the idea of the expressive work of art with the idea of the scientific map; they can refer to the past, present and future; they can create fresh ways of seeing and provoke new meanings in contemporary debates.

Many of the issues highlighted by Roger Casement’s work in Putumayo – human rights abuses, cruelty and environmental degradation – are issues still relevant and urgent today. They include the struggle of the international Human Rights movement to end impunity for the perpetrators of human rights violations and the need to link environmental and human rights consequences in our understanding of the costs implicit in the production of goods and services in today’s global economy and the transnational supply chain.





Fig. 2. Imperial Federation League world map showing the full extent of the British Empire at the time published for the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in 1886. (Cornell University – PJ Mode Collection of Persuasive Cartography.)

Julio César Arana was never prosecuted. He moved effortlessly and luxuriously between his properties in London, Europe and South America. Despite the scandal associated with Casement's investigation, Arana went on to have a successful political career. He was elected a senator and died in Lima, Peru in 1952, aged 88.

Casement was hanged, aged 51, in Pentonville Prison in London on 3 August, 1916.

Included in the picture are:

- a 1966 Irish 5p stamp, commemorating Roger Casement
- a photograph of Julio Cesar Arana;
- a Peruvian stamp
- many images drawn from photographs taken at the time:
  - indigenous people chained together
  - the body of a young girl
  - the face of a young girl
  - Casa Arana, a company building
- a galleon
- a clown
- a journal
- A diagram of a section of the South American Continent and the Amazon River
- An early twentieth century motor car
- Images of indigenous people before the coming of the rubber company as imagined

by a nineteenth century European artist

The Union Jack

A pith helmet

Various symbols

Some text including:

The symbol for a battle, crossed swords, and 'the rubber trade' (reversed)

'The Putumayo atrocity'(reversed)

### **Works Cited**

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- Taussig, Michael, *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986).

- Yahuarcani, Rember, "Los ríos de nuestra memoria" in *Mundo Amazonico*, 5, (2014) pp. 197-209.