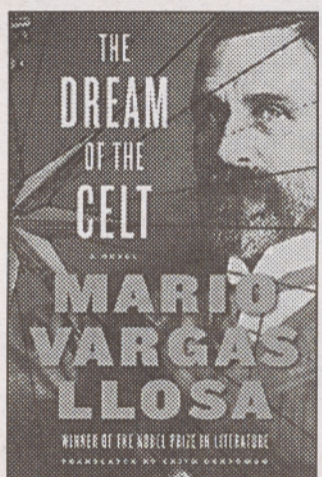


Words and deeds

Mario Vargas Llosa explores the extraordinary lessons of Roger Casement, from knighthood to revolutionary



The Dream of the Celt by Mario Vargas Llosa

BY JOE MARTIN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

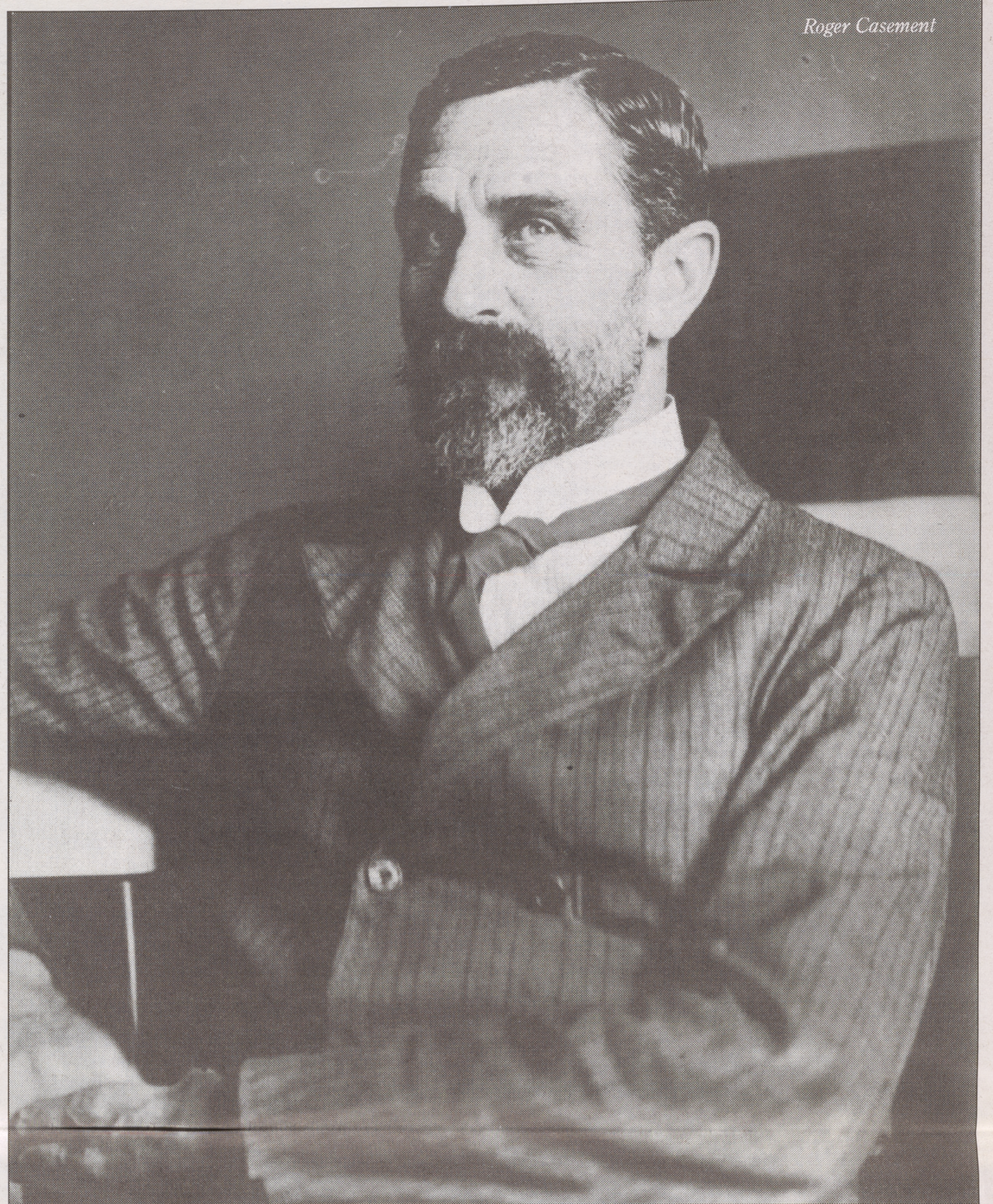
Roger Casement was born a middle-class Protestant in Dublin, Ireland, in 1864. As a youth he dreamed of adventure and exotic places, and his extraordinary life took on truly panoramic dimensions. His first taste of Africa came in 1883. Casement worked for a Liverpool shipping line that sent him to a port close to the mouth of the Congo River. By the time he was 30, Casement had spent most of his adult life on what many then called the Dark Continent. Eventually he was appointed British consul, initially in Bomo, Congo.

In 1903, at the behest of the government, Casement journeyed to the innermost reaches of the Congo, at that time the domain of King Leopold II of Belgium. In the depths of that equatorial region, Casement investigated the malicious treatment of the Congolese, whose forced labor extracted tons of rubber from the wilderness. A few years later, again at the government's request, Casement traveled to the fetid jungles of the Amazon to investigate torture and oppression on Peruvian rubber plantations where Native Americans were enslaved.

The Peruvian Nobel Prize winner Mario Vargas Llosa has brought the spectacular saga of Casement to life in his stunning new novel "The Dream of the Celt." It is an artful working of Casement's outer and inner existence exquisitely painted on a historical canvas.

Casement's writings about execrable abuses in the Congo and the Amazon reverberated around the world. Civilized readers everywhere were horrified by atrocities casually meted out to native Africans and indigenous people of South America. Casement was acknowledged internationally as an intrepid advocate for human rights and was made a Knight of the British Empire. Unbeknownst to English officials, Casement was becoming a revolutionary resentful of the oppression of his own people: "There in the Congo, living with injustice and violence, he had discovered the great lie of colonialism and begun to feel more 'Irish,' that is, like the citizen of a country occupied and exploited by the Empire that had bled and weakened Ireland." And he had another secret: He was gay.

Llosa depicts the young consul, who was still unaware of the terrible toll borne by the Congolese: "[Casement] resumed his tedious consular tasks: making note of the



Roger Casement

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ships that arrived and departed, the goods the merchant ships unloaded – rifles, munitions, chicote whips, wine, holy pictures, crucifixes, colored glass beads – and the ones they carried to Europe, the immense stacks of rubber, ivory, and animal skins. This was the exchange that in his youthful imagination was going to save the Congolese from cannibalism and from the Arab merchants of Zanzibar who controlled the slave trade, and open the doors of civilization to them!"

But it is not long before the Irishman has doubts about Europe's incursion into Africa. Casement is told by famed explorer Henry Morton Stanley, himself a party to the mayhem exterminating black Africans, "They'll be taught how to dress, how to pray to the true God, how to speak like a Christian and not use those monkey dialects.... Their children and grandchildren will thank us. And it wouldn't surprise me if in a little while they begin to worship Leopold the Second the way they worship their fetishes and hideous objects."

Casement, who once adulated Stanley, comes to despise him and begins to discern that his naive notion of "Christianity, civilization and commerce" was disastrous for Africa.

Later, near the Putumayo River in the Amazon, Casement again encounters what greed can do to humans and contemplates the arrogant attitude of the venal oppressors: "For them the Amazonian indigenous people were not, strictly speaking, human beings, but an inferior, contemptible form of existence, closer to animals than civilized people. That's why it was legitimate to exploit them, whip them,

abduct them, take them to the rubber plantations or, if they resisted, kill them like rabid dogs." His report on the sadistic treatment of native people would bring down the Peruvian Amazon Company.

On completing his work in Peru, Casement plunged into revolutionary Irish politics. He would go to Germany – then at war with Britain – and try unsuccessfully to raise an Irish Brigade of Irish prisoners fighting in Britain's army. Shortly before the Easter rebellion exploded in Dublin, Casement was taken by submarine back to Ireland. Arriving exhausted on a beach in Kerry, he was arrested and soon incarcerated in the Tower of London, a once-celebrated knight now condemned as an Irish traitor.

It was during his sensational trial that British officials allowed Casement's personal diaries to be made public. Some entries were graphic depictions of homosexual encounters. Over the years there has been considerable discussion as to their authenticity. It is now accepted that Casement was gay, whether or not all of his diaries' contents were his own or forgeries. On Aug. 3, 1916, Casement was hanged in Pentonville Prison and ignominiously buried there. In 1965 his body was finally repatriated to Ireland, where he was given the state funeral due a hero.

In Llosa's grim, sprawling and electrifying tale, Casement's story is told in sublime prose in which he is duly recognized as a compassionate man of conviction, a dauntless crusader for decency and the dignity of all human beings.

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