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“the incorrigible Irishman”: Roger Casement and the ‘greening’ of Irish Studies

Eóin Flannery

I had accepted Imperialism – British rule was to be extended at all costs, because it was the best for everyone under the sun, and those who opposed that extension ought rightly to be ‘smashed’. I was on the high road to being a regular Imperialist jingo – although at heart underneath all, and unsuspected almost to myself, I had remained an Irishman. Well, the war, [i.e., the Boer War] gave me qualms at the end – the concentration camps bigger ones – and finally, when up in those lonely Congo forests where I found Leopold – I found also myself – the incorrigible Irishman.

Letter from Roger Casement to Alice Stopford Green from Santos, Brazil, 20 April 1907.

I

Postcolonial studies has been the object of much vexed discussion and frequent approbation on account of its perceived preoccupation with discursive analyses and theoretical self-reference. Marxist critics such as Aijaz Ahmad, Benita Parry and Epifanio San Juan Jr., among others, have repeatedly, and differentially, accosted postcolonial studies for the abandonment of its longer-term genealogy founded on anti-colonial activism and Marxist politics, and for its abdication of materialist critical responsibilities in the present.¹ However, a number of critics and publications have sought to redress these materialist lacunae by ‘greening’ the terms of reference of postcolonial analyses. In many ways postcolonial studies has always been attuned to the politics of space and place, and to the ecological traumas of exploitation, as Edward Said notes in *Culture and Imperialism*: ‘Imperialism is after all an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted

¹ For example see, Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London, 1992); Benita Parry, ‘Directions and Dead Ends in Postcolonial Studies,’ in David Theo Goldberg and Ato Quayson eds., *Relocating Postcolonialism* (Oxford, 2002), 66-81; and Epifanio San Juan Jr., *Beyond Postcolonial Theory* (Basingstoke, 1998).

and finally brought under control.² Said points to the incremental but relentless discursive objectification of human and non-human ecologies of the colonised world, processes under which landscapes, languages and cultures were catalogued and often sundered.³ Thus the literary histories and cultural histories of postcolonial ecocriticism provide telling reminders of the intrusive footprints of both the material realities and the signifying exercises of imperialism. Equally, in aggregating the critical tools of postcolonial criticism and ecocriticism there is the potential for historically informed and theoretically sophisticated critiques of the material and discursive agents of power in the contemporary politico-economic conjuncture. With such sentiments in mind, Malcolm Sen concludes that: 'postcolonial ecocriticism broadens this field [ecocriticism] by placing power relationships at the centre of analysis.'⁴

Reflecting on the relative novelty and, by implication, dearth, heretofore, of exchanges between ecocriticism and postcolonialism, Pablo Mukherjee leans on the obvious materialist ties between the two fields: 'considering both positions are fundamentally concerned with the environments and cultures of capitalist modernity, it seems to me that there has been nothing like the degree and intensity of cross-fertilisation that potentially offer each other.'⁵ Indeed, tracking the genealogical origins of both ecocriticism and postcolonialism, Mukherjee discloses a high rate of common ground between the two discourses.⁶ If, as he suggests: 'both fields claimed nothing less than a comprehensive critique of European modernity, in particular, its core component of capitalism, colonialism/imperialism and patriarchy,' then it is all the more lamentable, and currently exigent, that a critical alignment of ecocriticism and postcolonialism is facilitated.⁷ Such potential solidarity is voiced by another prominent advocate of 'green' postcolonial studies, Graham Huggan, in equally bold terms: 'both are equally concerned with critically

² Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London, 1993), 271.

³ See Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge, 1986).

⁴ Malcolm Sen, 'Spatial Justice: The ecological imperative and postcolonial development,' *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 45, 4 (2009), 366.

⁵ Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel* (Basingstoke, 2010), 17.

⁶ On the relationship between postcolonialism and environmentalism see, Rob Nixon, 'Environmentalism and Postcolonialism,' in Ania Loomba, Suvir Kaul, Matti Bunzl, Antoinette Burton and Jed Esty eds., *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* (Durham, NC and London, 2005), 233–51, and Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass, 2011), 233–62.

⁷ Mukherjee, *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel*, 57.

analysing the representational mechanisms that lend legitimacy to these practices [corporate expansionism and technological managerialism], demonstrating the power of culture to (re)shape the word, and through it, the world.⁸ In this extract Huggan appears to confine his argument to the ‘representational mechanisms’ that underwrite global capitalist modernity, but elsewhere, with Helen Tiffin, he clarifies his position on this point: ‘Both postcolonialism and ecocriticism are [...] aimed at providing conceptual possibilities for a *material* transformation of the world [original emphasis].’⁹ These latter aspirations are freighted with still more utopian intent, and in their materialist impulses find common cause with Mukherjee’s earlier agenda for the critical convention of ecocriticism and postcolonialism, and with arguments alive within the field of environmental justice.¹⁰ Having learned the hard way for many years under critical and political scrutiny from Marxist commentators within and without the field, it seems that ‘green’ postcolonialists are now more sensitised to the *material* dimensions of the objects and subjects of their criticism. Convening postcolonialism and ecocriticism under a materialist banner is, then, one of a skein of philosophical and critical coalitions rooted in broadly ecocritical circles.

II

In many ways, despite Gerry Smyth’s hopeful prediction in 2001 that ‘it seems likely that Irish Studies and ecocriticism will have much to say to each other,’¹¹ the field of Irish Studies has yet to exploit fully the critical and analytical resources of ecocriticism. Though some recent ‘green’ shoots have appeared within literary studies in book-length publications and editions by Christine Cusick, Eamonn Wall, Maureen O’Connor, Donna Potts, Lucy Collins and Andrew Carpenter, Robert Brazeau and Derek Gladwin, Alison Lacivita, and Tim Wenzell.¹² Overall, there has been a relatively laboured emergence

⁸ Graham Huggan, ‘Postcolonial Ecocriticism and the limits of Green Romanticism,’ *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 45, 1, (2009), 6.

⁹ Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, ‘Green Postcolonialism,’ *Interventions: international journal of postcolonial studies*, 9, 1, (2007), 10. See also, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (London, 2010).

¹⁰ On the field of environmental justice see, Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, (Oxford, 2005), 112–27; and Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans and Rachel Stein eds., *The Environmental Justice Reader* (Tucson, 2002).

¹¹ Gerry Smyth, *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination* (Basingstoke, 2001), 11.

¹² See, Christine Cusick ed., *Out of the Earth: Ecocritical Readings of Irish Texts* (Cork, 2010); Eamonn Wall, *Writing the Irish West: Ecologies and Traditions* (Notre Dame, 2011);

of sustained ecocritical writing within Irish Studies that might productively contribute to international conversations on the political and cultural implications of global environmental change. There have always been creative and critical engagements with the Irish landscape – a trend partly occasioned by the country's protracted history of colonialism, which is, more recently, a prime concern of ecocriticism. While there have been isolated interventions in both literary studies and economic history, these creative and critical legacies have yet to yield a body of ecocritical writing, though there are emerging collaborations and publications. Perhaps in some measure on foot of the cynical, and ultimately self-defeating, transvaluation of the Irish landscape under the yoke of the Celtic Tiger, and its accompanying property 'boom,' there have been belated and sobering critical responses that have taken impetus from some international ecocriticism.

One signally productive step in ecocritical Irish Studies is the appearance of a specially-themed 'Irish' issue of the open-access on-line *The Journal of Ecocriticism*, which coheres theoretical, literary historical, materialist and feminist perspectives within the limits of the issue. In his contribution, 'Challenges to an Irish Eco-criticism,' John Wilson Foster addresses this very prospect; what form can a putative Irish franchise of ecocriticism take? What parameters should be set in the inauguration and the development of such a disciplinary new departure within Irish literary and cultural studies? Wilson Foster's essay is simultaneously speculative and suggestive; the piece asks questions about the form and contents of an Irish ecocriticism, while at the same time offering indicative texts and authors. Spanning mainstays of the Irish literary canon such as James Joyce, William Butler Yeats, Heaney and Padraic Colum, as well as essayists and nature writers, Foster argues for a sundering of the intractable intellectual borders that have long persisted between science and the arts and humanities in Ireland. As he concludes:

I have tried to enumerate Irish paradigmatic perceptions and representations of the natural world that still exert great cultural influence on and in our literature – the aesthetic, the scientific, the economic,

Donna Potts, *The Pastoral Tradition in Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Columbia, 2011); Lucy Collins and Andrew Carpenter eds., *The Irish Poet and the Natural World: An Anthology of Verse in English from the Tudors to the Romantics* (Cork, 2014); Robert Brazeau and Derek Gladwin eds., *Eco-Joyce: The Environmental Imagination of James Joyce* (Cork, 2014); Maureen O'Connor, *The Female and the Species: The Animal in Irish Women's Writing* (Oxford, 2010); Alison Lacivita, *The Ecology of Finnegans Wake* (Gainesville, 2015); and Tim Wenzell, *Emerald Green: An Ecocritical Study of Irish Literature* (Newcastle, 2009).

the Romantic, the nativist, the religious, the folkloristic. Of these, only the economic and scientific have not been culturally celebrated by many literary critics, while science's productions – from nature-writing to scientific papers and monographs – are largely ignored by critics and anthologists, and by writers who are scientifically unsympathetic, indifferent or unconversant. Yet eco-criticism requires the scientific paradigm.¹³

The contribution is an informative metacritical intervention in the burgeoning area of ecocritical Irish Studies, and it engages with recent international and Irish publications on culture and ecology, including those by scholars such as Glen A. Love, Cusick and Wenzell. Foster's essay, then, asks as many questions as it answers, provoking scholars to trace and to test the boundaries and the possibilities of this novel field within Irish Studies. And, with such thoughts in mind, the current discussion retrieves and re-positions a relatively familiar historical figure, the Irish humanitarian pioneer and revolutionary nationalist, Roger Casement. Reading Casement through materialist, postcolonial and ecocritical filters, we locate Casement's early twentieth-century humanitarian and environmental justice campaigns as anticipatory of equivalent contemporary writing and activism. In this way Casement is exemplary of the ways in which postcolonial and ecocritical analyses are complementary and adjacent in the Irish and global contexts. Casement's career and legacies highlight the continuities that wed the structural unevenness and iniquities of the capitalist, (neo-) imperialist regimes that are historically and contemporaneously culpable for local and global environmental degradation and injustice.

III

Opening his 1964 essay on Casement, William Roger Louis gestures to the incendiary effects of Casement's investigations in and subsequent reports on Leopold II's Congo. In Louis's view, Casement's work was both a matter of exposing, and providing evidence of, the long rumoured human rights abuses in that region, but also galvanising a widespread public campaign against Leopold's tyrannical reign in the Congo. For Louis:

In 1903 Roger Casement fired the smouldering Congo dispute into a

¹³ John Wilson Foster, 'Challenges to an Irish Eco-criticism,' *The Journal of Ecocriticism* 5, 2 (2013) <http://ojs.unbc.ca/index.php/joe/article/view/515/452>.

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 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 [...] was profoundly influenced by Roger Casement.¹⁴

Louis quotes from one of Casement's letters to Lord Lansdowne, British Foreign Secretary at the time in September 1903, in which we encounter details of the extreme violence, mutilation and exploitation witnessed by Casement across the summer of 1903 in the Congo. But Louis also notes the key role Casement played in furnishing material first-hand evidence from other actors in and witnesses to Leopold's regime for the British Foreign Office. And some of the key features of Casement's *Congo Report*, and his later *Amazon Journal*, are the methodological approaches adopted by Casement, as well as the tonal variety with which he articulates his experiences in Central Africa and South America.¹⁵ Casement's meticulous and impassioned responses to, and indictments of, these two crucibles of imperial expropriation and violence must, then, be read in terms of the longer brutal history of European globalised imperialist capitalism. In both cases wild rubber is the sought-after natural resource; it is pursued at all costs as the extractive companies dispense with legality and human rights with remarkable ease. From one perspective, according to Andrew Porter: 'At a time when, despite the extent of the issues calling for its attention, the humanitarian movement was in danger of being overwhelmed, Casement's various efforts made sure that it did not become defunct [...] In his was he helped to ensure the survival of the humanitarian strand in British nationalism and imperial thought well into the twentieth century.'¹⁶ But Casement's legacy is also legible in relation to issues pertaining to the critique of empire and colonialism; the dehumanising violence of global capital; and the ecologically deforming imprints of such capital across the Global South. Each of these strands are differentially germane to the period and

¹⁴ William Roger Louis, 'Roger Casement and the Congo,' *The Journal of African History* 5, 1 (1964), 99.

¹⁵ Michael Taussig addresses such issues as they relate to Casement's *Putumayo Report* in his *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago, 1987).

¹⁶ Andrew Porter, 'Sir Roger Casement and the International Humanitarian Movement,' *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 29, 2 (2001), 72.

places in which Casement worked, but are equally relevant to our contemporary period of global ecological devastation. Thus, Casement's work, writings and potential legacies must be framed in the context of current political and cultural resources and debates including, postcolonial ecocriticism, ecological Marxism, the environmentalism of the poor and environmental justice.

Just as Casement cast his own experiences and the systematic slaughter and exploitation he witnessed in broad transhistorical terms – as part of the mercantilist colonisation of South America by the erstwhile Iberian monarchies – so too Angus Mitchell stresses the relevance of Casement's work to ongoing postcolonial and neo-colonial analyses. And it is this strand of Mitchell's iteration of Casement that is most relevant to our location of his legacy in relation to current debates within materialist and postcolonial ecocriticisms. Casement's implication within, and self-conscious articulation of, anti-colonial movements and ideas during his lifetime has more often been eclipsed by the controversies surrounding the authenticity of the 'Black Diaries.'¹⁷ The ravages and slaughter encountered by Casement were enduring and widespread, though they cannot be historicised out of significance to equivalent contemporary actions. In candid terms, Mitchell suggests that: 'Casement's interrogation of empire defined the unthinkable and articulated the unspeakable. Above all it exposed conceits, fantasies and lies at the heart of the 'civilizing' project and in the relationship between the periphery and the metropolitan.'¹⁸ Mitchell's analysis is both ethical and materialist, reclaiming the morality of Casement, a figure long encoded as irredeemably immoral, but also suggesting that Casement should be considered within the pantheon of twentieth-century anti-imperialist thinkers and activists. While some of the company – at first glance – might seem incongruous, each of the figures and/or organisations were aware of the living or dead Casement. The gallery of political thinkers arrayed by Mitchell spans a diversity of hues of Marxist and Socialist politics; Irish nationalism; African-American politics; as well as anti- and post-colonial African politics:

Between 1911 and 1916 Casement evolved into a revolutionary

¹⁷ On the controversies surrounding the veracity of Casement's 'Black Diaries', see W.J. McCormack, *Roger Casement in Death: Or Haunting the Free State* (Dublin, 2002); and Jeffrey Dudgeon, *Roger Casement: The Black Diaries - With a Study of His Background, Sexuality and Irish Political Life* (Belfast, 2002).

¹⁸ Angus Mitchell, 'Roger Casement: contextualising the Black Diaries,' Keynote Lecture delivered at *The Irish Seminar*, Keough-Naughton Centre for Irish Studies, University of Notre Dame, Newman House, Dublin, 9 July 2003. (2003).

Leviathan. Evidence for this might be found in the tremendous intellectual support surrounding him at the end: Leon Trotsky and W.E.B. du Bois both wrote obituaries for Casement. Those who signed his appeals ranged between Leonard Woolf and other figures connected to Bloomsbury to representations from the Negro Fellowship League and AOH. His legacy can be found in the writings of Rosa Luxembour, Marcus Garvey, James Connolly, Robert Monteith, Kwame Nkrumah.¹⁹

It is not difficult to see, then, how Mitchell builds his case for Casement's relevance to both anti-colonial politics and to more contemporary debates with postcolonial studies. As we have noted, race, nationalism[s], left-wing politics all felt affinities with Casement's exposures and diagnoses of the systemic destruction of peripheral ecologies and communities in Africa and South America. And these are all discourses that manifest, in various ways, in his writings on these two locations. But what is pertinent for the moment is one of Mitchell's conclusions on Casement's critical symmetry with contemporary critical engagements with imperial histories and newer forms of imperial action. Again, as Mitchell explains: 'It is often hard not to think that Casement was not anticipating various postcolonial paradigms in his production of history, certainly many of his attitudes towards history fit in with significant areas of postcolonial discourse theory. Robert Young begins his historical introduction to *Postcolonialism* with Casement travelling out of the Amazon in 1910.'²⁰

Equally, 'nationalism' and 'republicanism' had themselves become incendiary terms within Irish political and intellectual circles by the 1990s. And it is, perhaps, unsurprising that many Irish people took the easy option and chose what appeared to be an uncomplicated 'global' identity within the neo-liberal capitalist conjuncture, rather than attempt to come to terms with or re-imagine Irish civil society on egalitarian republican principles. Thus, both the unfettered zeal with which the Irish State, and large sections of the Irish economy and its population embraced the tenets and lifestyle options of global capitalism, together with the larger period of the Northern Irish 'Troubles,' form a backdrop to Mitchell's introductory defence of Casement and his socio-political actions and beliefs at the beginning of the twentieth-century. The final contextual point that informs Mitchell's rehabilitation of Casement's global humanitarianism is the larger imperial background. Historical patterns

¹⁹ Mitchell, 'Roger Casement: contextualising the Black Diaries,' (2003).

²⁰ Ibid.

of imperial exploitation are explicit here in Mitchell's argument, but Ireland's status as a postcolonial society is also implicit in Mitchell's case. For our purposes, what Mitchell infers is that not only is the 'dimming' of historical memory about Casement's humanitarian work a tragedy in itself, its potential exemplarity in the face of recent and contemporary forms of neo-imperial global capitalist exploitation – human-ecological and non-human ecological – is just as dispiriting. The importance of recovering and appreciating Casement's work is not so much to define the work, or the man, for that matter, as belonging to any single national culture or cause, or as an agent of any specific cause of dispensation. Rather, as Mitchell suggests, Casement's legacies are, potentially, global and inclusive, and can transcend narrow definitions of race, ethnicity, nationality and locality. As Mitchell argues: 'Casement's legacy cannot be exclusively claimed by any one political group or religious domination. His achievement belongs to that universal understanding based on humanity, tolerance, justice, decency and respect for difference.'²¹

And this is an argument re-iterated recently by Luke Gibbons in a piece on the on-going Irish financial crisis. For Gibbons, Casement's life and legacies represent convincing alternatives to the abstract logic of neo-liberal capital, and he utilises Casement as he counters Slavoj Žižek's orthodox Marxist critique of the current global financial crisis. In Žižek's view, according Gibbons: 'capitalism functions as a "totality," melting the solidity of all cultural difference into thin air.'²² Still further, for Gibbons: 'Žižek's argument operates on the assumption that globalization has divested itself of all national moorings, and is free to roam the world at will.'²³ But this is radically contradicted by the example set by Casement in his 'localization' of solidarity across colonised cultures. It is hardly surprising in the context of Gibbons's previous work that Casement's work and legacies are figured in terms of the politics of postcoloniality.²⁴ Casement may well have been an influential figure on the *global* stage of nascent humanitarianism at the beginning of the twentieth-century, but, persuasively in Gibbons's view, the motivations for and the effects of this labour were local: 'The radical humanitarianism of Roger Casement, for example, defended indigenous peoples [...] but it did not emanate from an abstract universal humanism addressing the plight of a benighted local culture.'

²¹ Angus Mitchell, *Roger Casement* (London, 2003), 8.

²² Luke Gibbons, "'The Wild West of European Finance": Anachronism, Modernity and the Irish Crisis,' *Field Day Review* 7 (2011), 131.

²³ *Ibid.*, 132.

²⁴ In particular Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork, 1996).

Casement's universalism took the form, rather, of an encounter between two specific endangered cultures [...] This "rooted cosmopolitanism" challenges Žižek's reluctance to pursue the disavowed local or national attachments that often lie submerged beneath surface cosmopolitanism.²⁵ In other words, Casement's affiliative and empathetic relationships with the endangered and exploited cultures he encountered in both the Congo and the Putumayo were founded upon a shared sense, and history, of colonial expropriation. Where the levelling logic of global capital disallows any degree of resistance through differential identification, in Žižek's case, for Gibbons, Casement's does not stem from a paternalistic sense of abstract justice, but from recognition of shared suffering across cultures. While Casement was alive to the systemic nature of the regimes of cruelty and expropriation thriving in the Congo and the Putumayo, his identification with those under duress arose from specific experiences and empathy with particular local cultures.²⁶ Thus one strand of our consideration of Casement is in terms of what is currently trading as postcolonial ecocriticism, as well as materialist ecocritical analyses. Simply put, attention needs to be given to the colonial context of Casement's experiences and writings in synchronicity with his commitment to indigenous human rights and environmental justice.

While there are conflicts among historians as to the exact level of Casement's achievement as a systematic thinker, Séamas Ó Síocháin, confesses to treading the middle-ground in this particular debate, and he traces consistent and evolving threads of thought across Casement's writing and his correspondence. Ó Síocháin identifies: 'some patterned ideas of Casement[']s moving from regional experiences to wide level: (i) exploitation in the Congo and Putumayo as systemic; (ii) his growing recognition of exploitation in other parts of the world; (iii) a range of ideas he expressed on such topics as "empires," "capital," "civilization," and "land":²⁷ Casement was attuned to the longevity of historical colonial violence in Latin America, but also to the breadth of human suffering across the globe under differentiated regimes of colonial terror. In this latter respect, Ó Síocháin quotes from an impassioned letter sent by Casement to his fellow-traveller in the *Congo Reform Association*,

²⁵ Gibbons, "The Wild West of European Finance": Anachronism, Modernity and the Irish Crisis,' 133.

²⁶ In his essay, 'The Elsewhere Empire,' Casement referred to the British Empire as: 'that system of world exploitation centred in London.' Roger Casement, *The Crime Against Europe: A Possible Outcome of the war of 1914* (Teddington, Middlesex, [1914] 2007), 67.

²⁷ Séamas Ó Síocháin, "'More power to the Indians': Roger Casement, the Putumayo, and indigenous rights,' *Irish Journal of Anthropology* 14, 2 (2011), 6.

the journalist and campaigner, Edmund Dene Morel.²⁸ In this letter Casement identifies the localities preyed upon by the excesses of colonialism: ‘These slave pits of the earth – Congo, French Congo, Mexico, Peru, possibly Korea and Formosa under the Japanese, Angola with Sao Tome under the Portugese [...] Tackling Leopold’s Congo has set in motion a big movement – it must be *a movement of human liberation all the world over* [...] you must remember that the cause of human freedom is as wide as the world.’²⁹ The specific and multiple local exposures to the degradations of imperial capitalist exploitation – and accompanying mutilation, sexual violence and genocide – alerted Casement to the extremities of local manifestations of the globalised exertions of empire.

Identifying with these longer histories of colonial oppression, as an Irishman, Casement chafed against imperial paternalism – often apathy – of many of his peers and contemporaries. At least part of Casement’s moral repugnance at the treatment of, and ethical solidarity with, such populations was conditioned by historical contiguities and symmetries across cultures – historical and cultural differences were not prohibitive of historical, moral and political unity for Casement. And one of the ways in which Casement’s work can be read in colonial, postcolonial and ecocritical frames is his devotion to the plights of indigenous communities, and the sundering of their environments – an interest which resonates with contemporary campaigns for the preservation of indigenous cultures and lands within environmental justice movements. As Ó Síocháin once more makes clear: ‘Casement was not unique in not sharing the dominant ideology, but by personality, by values and by historical circumstances, his support for indigenous rights developed into a life commitment. What comes across very strongly is that throughout his career Casement was possessed of a deep feeling for other humans, colonial subjects.’³⁰

IV

Casement’s first humanitarian foray took him to the Congo, that emblematic crucible immortalised in *Heart of Darkness* by Casement’s contemporary and acquaintance, Joseph Conrad. On foot of the infamous Berlin Conference in 1884–5, and abetted by the establishment of a number of spurious

²⁸ For more on Morel and Casement and the Congo, see, Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (London, [1998] 2006).

²⁹ Ó Síocháin “‘More power to the Indians’: Roger Casement, the Putumayo, and indigenous rights,” 7.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

humanitarian organisations, Leopold II of Belgium had secured an effective personal fiefdom in the Congo Free State, located on the upper Congo River. However, as Ó Síocháin and O'Sullivan note: 'By the mid-1890s, [...] a steadily increasing trickle of reports had reached Europe and the United States concerning the treatment of the State's black population. The reports, if they were to be believed, were shocking, suggesting a regime, not only of pervasive coercion and exactions, but also of floggings, mutilations and widespread killings.'³¹ Such reports prompted significant numbers of protests among humanitarians – among them Edmund Dene Morel – and during the early summer of 1903 Casement was instructed to depart for the upper Congo and attempt to establish the accuracy of these persistent reports. By the end of September 1903, after journeying through a selected number of areas, Casement was moved enough to write to the Foreign Secretary, Lord Lansdowne:

I am amazed and confounded at what I have both seen and heard; and if I, in the enjoyment of all the resources and privileges of civilized existence, know not where to turn to, or to whom to make appeal on behalf of these unhappy people whose sufferings I have witnessed, and whose wrongs have burnt into my heart, how can they, poor, panic-stricken fugitives, in their own forest homes, turn for justice to their oppressors. The one dreadful, dreary cry that has been ringing in my ears for the last six weeks has been 'Protect us from our protectors'.³²

Though having spent the better part of two decades in colonial service across Africa by this point, Casement's experiences in Leopold's Congo were of a violent extremity far beyond those previously witnessed. And, as became apparent during his later Putumayo investigation, though there are figurehead individuals highlighted – Leopold and Julio Arana respectively – Casement's diagnosis centres on the entrenched and widespread effectiveness of *systemic* exploitation and murderous violence. In his own words, and at the conclusion of his Congo investigation, Casement declares in a letter dated 12 September

³¹ Séamas Ó Síocháin and Michael O'Sullivan, *The Eyes of Another Race: Roger Casement's Congo Report and 1903 Diary* (Dublin, 2003), 1.

³² Roger Casement to Lansdowne, 30 September 1903, The National Archive (TNA): FO 10/806, cited in Angus Mitchell, 'Roger Casement: the evolution of an enemy of empire – I,' in Eóin Flannery and Angus Mitchell eds., *Enemies of Empire: New Perspectives on imperialism, literature and historiography* (Dublin, 2007), 47.

1903 that: ‘I do not accuse an individual; I accuse a system.’³³ Casement’s was not an overarching critique of a unitary global system – though it had materialist bases, his respective investigative reports arise out of specific, local manifestations of Western capitalist, imperialist. Casement’s report documents both the human and non-human sundering of the upper Congo region by Leopold, and the reign of terror – to use Michael Taussig’s term – maintained by the Belgian monarch’s *Force Publique*, in forcibly policing the sourcing and harvesting of wild rubber.

Casement’s report to Lansdowne was based upon two and a half months spent in the upper Congo region: ‘during which time I visited several points on the Congo River itself, up to the junction of the Lulongo River, ascended the river and its principal feeder, the Lopori, as far as Bongandanga, and went round Lake Mantumba.’³⁴ Given the scale of Leopold’s Congo concession, the area of territory covered in the compilation of the report is minimal. But Casement justifies this methodology on the grounds that this is one of the most productive regions in the Congo for wild rubber, and therefore is strongly representative of the larger operation. And furthermore, it is an area that he is familiar with, having spent time there in 1887 when: ‘I had visited most of the places I now revisited.’³⁵ This prior knowledge provides Casement with another justification for his *modus operandi* as he ‘was thus able to institute a comparison between a state of affairs I had myself seen when the natives lived their own savage lives in anarchic and disorderly communities, uncontrolled by Europeans, and that created by more than a decade of very energetic European intervention.’³⁶ And Mitchell accents the efficacy of Casement’s previous experiences in his role as investigator: ‘his [previous] direct experience of working practices from within made him an exceptional witness to its excesses and hypocrisies.’³⁷

In this comparative vein, Casement opens his Congo report with a commentary on the sharp decline he notices in the resident population of the Lower Congo. And, initially at least, this denuding of the area’s population is attributed to the effects of ‘sleeping sickness,’ or ‘African Trypanosomiasis.’³⁸

³³ Cited in Ó Síocháin and O’Sullivan, 40.

³⁴ Ó Síocháin and O’Sullivan (eds), *The Eyes of Another Race: Roger Casement’s Congo Report and 1903 Diary*, 49.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Mitchell, *Casement*, 19.

³⁸ Ó Síocháin and O’Sullivan, *The Eyes of Another Race: Roger Casement’s Congo Report and 1903 Diary*, 50.

There is some justification for this conclusion because, as Ó Síocháin and O'Sullivan detail in their editorial notes: 'According to one authority, an epidemic in the Congo between 1896 and 1906 killed 500,000 people.'³⁹ Though not having yet witnessed the ravages of the Leopoldian system, or the brutalities enacted by his *Force Publique* agents on the ground, there are elements of foreshadowing in Casement's introductory description of the lower Congo. Again, at this point, there is no direct placement of blame or culpability, but the ruination is consistent with what he encounters later, and throughout, his relatively brief excursion across the region. Yet the subtext anticipates that other factors – not necessarily related to disease – have accounted for the sharp population decline: 'The natives certainly attribute their alarming death-rate to this [sleeping sickness] as one of the inducing causes, although they attribute, and I think principally, their rapid decreases in numbers to other causes as well.'⁴⁰ It is not just the information that is arresting here; we get a further insight into Casement's methodology in the production of this report, but also the later Amazon-Putumayo report. One of the noteworthy aspects of Casement's humanitarian work is his apparent concern for indigenous populations on both continents, and this finds form in the ways that he permits them a voice within the texts of his official reports. While Casement alludes to the stark fall in population – a quantitative loss – he goes on to demonstrate sensitivity to the qualitative effect of such an acute decline: 'Perhaps the most striking change observed during my journey into the interior was the great reduction observable everywhere in native life. Communities I had formerly known as large and flourishing centres of population are today entirely gone, or now exist in such diminished numbers as to be no longer recognizable.'⁴¹ While this pattern is not entirely attributable to the exercises of violent capitalist imperialism, both the quantitative and qualitative diminutions of this region are, at least in some measure, consequences of the Leopoldian regime. Casement here refers to 'native life' and to the 'communality' once evident in the lower Congo. What are on display are, of course, the impacts of Western capitalist operations on indigenous modes of living; exploitation of resources (labour and natural), together with widespread processes of violent dehumanisation contribute to the sundering of both human and non-human ecologies in this area.

³⁹ Ibid., 318.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 50.

⁴¹ Ibid., 50.

V

Casement's later achievement in exposing the genocidal industry of the Peruvian Amazon Company was quickly noted by the British press on the publication of his 'Blue Book' on the topic. Two days after the appearance of the 'Blue Book' the editorial of *The Times* on Monday 15 July 1912 was lavish in its commendation of both the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, but particularly Casement who, it declared: 'has deserved well of his countrymen and of mankind by the ability and zeal with which he has investigated under very difficult conditions an appalling iniquity.'⁴² The term 'appalling iniquity' makes the enterprise headed by Julio Cesar Arana sound as if it were unique or unprecedented, an anomalous outrage within the otherwise longer histories and broader geographies of imperial capitalism. But, of course, as Casement's prior experience in Leopold's Congo taught him, these regimes were historically consistent in so many ways; they were characterised by both longevity and brutality. Nevertheless, such reservations about the implications of the terminology used by *The Times* do not disqualify the appositeness of their use in the case of the Putumayo. What we are furnished with in Casement's *Amazon Journal*, which documents his excursions across the Amazon, is 'one of the most important indictments ever made against perpetrators of atrocities and imperial system building [...] [it] exposes the genocide of which international commerce is capable.'⁴³ Casement's *Amazon Journal* provides a first-hand account of the atrocities committed in order to build and to enhance the profitability of a London-registered multinational rubber company. Though headed by the Peruvian Julio Cesar Arana and, largely, for practical purposes, run by an Arana-ist cabal of family members and other associates, what gave Casement's investigation leverage was the company's British registration and, crucially, its employment and alleged abuse of Barbadian labourers, who remained British subjects at the time.

The initial prompt for a Foreign Office investigation on the ground in the Putumayo was provided by the publication of a series of articles in the magazine *Truth* by a young American engineer named Walter Hardenburg. On an ill-fated journey across the South American continent, Hardenburg and a colleague had the misfortune to fall into the hands of, and into dispute with, Arana's company officials. Having witnessed the appalling conditions of the company's operations in the Putumayo, Hardenburg resolved to attempt

⁴² Cited in Jordan Goodman, *The Devil and Mr Casement: One Man's Struggle for Human Rights in South America's Heart of Darkness* (London, 2009), 166.

⁴³ Angus Mitchell *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement* (Dublin, 1997), 53.

to expose the company to public censure, which was duly accomplished on foot of Casement's inquiries. In a letter sent to William Goose Tyrell, Private Secretary at the Foreign Office, from Iquitos, Brazil, dated 12 September 1910, after initial interviews and investigations in this, one of the principal advanced trading posts along the Amazonian interior, Casement's initial stirrings of disenchantment are explicit. He writes: 'Altogether what has been declared to us here in Iquitos is sickening and confirms the infamous character of the treatment of the Indians Hardenburg alleged [...] So far as I can see the staff of the Coy. [Company] on the Putumayo consists of "devilish criminals" – with a few exceptions and the attitude of the Peruvian government to it is – well hard to describe. The so-called "Comisario" on the Putumayo is a farce, and is undoubtedly an agent of the Company.'⁴⁴ Casement quickly discerned that violence and incarceration without impunity were staples of the economy that reigned in the forests of the Putumayo. Wilful ignorance and active complicity on the part of the judicial and political systems in Peru precluded dissent that might, heretofore, have afforded any measure of justice or basic human rights to the resident indigenous populations – principally Huitoto Indians.

As Casement divines through a steady, if not always initially willing, stream of first-hand testimonies, there is a systemic corruption to the Peruvian Amazon Company. Certainly some rubber stations and managers were far more brutal than others, but there is a consistency to the levels of violence and expropriation across the Putumayo. Indicative of these first-hand accounts is that detailed in another of Casement's letters, on this occasion to Gerald Sydney Spicer, which includes the testimony of one of the Barbadian labourers, Adolfus Gibbs. Gibbs, Casement writes: 'told me his story – he was very frightened, and refused twice to come, but probably thinks it safe to keep in with me than with the company. It [his statement] refers to Abisinia and Morelia, and he was witness of the murder of an Indian chief (his head cut off by Jimenez, chief of Morelia), and of innumerable floggings for insufficient rubber, all last year.'⁴⁵ The initial reticence of Casement's witness is consistent with the absence of legal accountability, and further into the Putumayo it registers the culture of terror and fear established and maintained under the sway of Arana's company. This witness describes what has been seen: summary execution and indiscriminate, often fatal, beatings and mutilations. But what Casement also encounters and records are the self-implicating testimonies of other Barbadian overseers in the service of the Company

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

and its pursuit of rubber. Thus, the ecological denuding of the Putumayo's rubber stocks is inseparable from the systemic terrorisation of its indigenous inhabitants. Shortly after the interview with Alfonso Gibbs, Casement notes the complacent complicity of the agents in the Company's systemic extraction of rubber from the Putumayo. If violent excess is one operational feature of the Peruvian Amazon Company's policy in the Putumayo, the system itself is one based on nothing less than slavery, according to Casement. In both attitude and practice, the Indian population are viewed, and treated, as property. Reflecting on a conversation with the British Vice Consul in Iquitos, David Cazes, Casement writes: 'Again and again I find slipping from his lips and those of others in Iquitos the unconscious admission of this system of wholesale slavery. Everyone nearly talks of "his Indians" just as if they were sheep or cattle – or rubber trees.'⁴⁶

The humanity of the Indian population faded behind the prospects of extracting ever more quantities of wild rubber; the disposable Indian was harnessed into servicing an alien economic system that simultaneously destroyed their indigenous ecologies and terrorised and decimated its human communities. With neither orthodox waged labour nor basic human rights to consider, the Peruvian Amazon Company could yield unadulterated profit from this remote local ecology. The eye-witness, first-hand accounts, and confessions, of the Barbadians form a telling part of Casement's primary material for his final report. And few are as self-incriminating as that of Joshua Dyall; Casement describes Dyall's statements as 'so grave,' and with good reason, as Dyall admitted: 'to five murders of Indians by his own hands, two he shot, two he beat to death by "smashing their testicles" with a stick under Normand's orders and with Normand helping, and one he flogged to death.'⁴⁷ Dyall's is not an isolated case and it gives an acute indication of the ferocity, not to mention the variety, of the murderous violence enacted upon the indigenous Indians as part of the machinery of what was a legitimate capitalist enterprise. Providing a basic and highly valuable, yet also increasingly everyday, commodity for Western markets and consumers, the Peruvian Amazon Company's success partly depended upon a system of summary execution. Not only is Dyall's account remarkable for its indication of the sheer diversity of methods deployed against the indigenous Amazonian communities, but what is even more telling is the sheer level of physical effort and time invested on the part of the perpetrator in their role as murderer. The three

⁴⁶ Ibid., 110.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 124.

latter murders are laborious and sadistic, revealing much about the attitude of the killer – and his superiors – to the non-humanity, or sub-humanity, of the enslaved labour. Yet again Casement does not lay ultimate culpability with the individual *capo* – final guilt resides with architects, managers of and profiteers from this system. As he records: ‘the real criminals, in my opinion, were the supreme agents or heads who directed this system of wrong-doing, and enslavement of Indians, and drew profit from it, closing their eyes to the inevitable result of the application of such a system in such conditions of lawlessness – or absence of law – as prevailed in the Putumayo.’⁴⁸

The human cost of the rubber system is at the forefront of his mind, and his emotions, yet in both his Amazon and Congo writings we glean that he is not insensitive to the widespread sundering of the non-human ecologies in these locations. In many respects, as the non-human environment is destroyed, the cultural and social ecosystems of its human inhabitants dissipate at the same time. At one point, while at the Occidente rubber station, Casement records on 1 and 2 October that the razing of the forest is endemic and merely a function of the ecological collateral damage of rubber extraction. In a passage that has resonance for contemporary patterns of environmental exploitation in the Amazon and elsewhere, Casement writes:

That the forest was gradually giving out its stock of rubber seemed almost apparent to me, as we found these ‘stations’ were continually changing their locality [...] Look at the list of abandoned stations on the company’s own map, abandoned or shifted. The stations were following the rubber tress. I understood that Fox was disappointed with the poor show of rubber tress he had encountered, and those, he said, exhausted and hacked to exhaustion. I enjoyed the walk. The forest extremely poor, small stunted trees, and I only saw one rubber tree in the whole 4 miles tramp, and it hacked to death.⁴⁹

If Casement applied his extensive previous knowledge and experience of Africa as a comparative gauge in his evaluation of Leopold’s Congo, the latter became a regular reference point in the later *Amazon Journal*. Undoubtedly there are emotional factors to be mindful of when we encounter such cross-colonial comparisons, but they are at least revealing of the comparable levels of ill-treatment meted out to the respective indigenous populations. More

⁴⁸ Ibid., 128.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 150.

obviously, the two contexts are wedded by the common extraction of wild rubber and by the methods employed to compel industrial levels of extraction. Yet there is also a sense that Arana's Putumayo regime actually exceeds the iniquities of Leopold's Congo. And the things that jar with Casement most of all are the duplicities and evasions of fact on the part of the British 'company' men, such the company accountant, Henry Gielgud. On 5 October, at the Occidente station, Casement dilates on the systematic terror and violence confronting him and his commission in the Putumayo. And part of Casement's reflection centres on the obtuseness of Gielgud's conclusions regarding the personalities and sites they have seen, as well as the damning testimonies they have received. In a rhetoric that, again, reveals a contextually-specific cultural hierarchy, Casement records: 'I don't object at all to Gielgud trying to defend his Company, that is loyal and right, but an Englishman educated at an English University should be able to smell right and wrong in a case of this kind.'⁵⁰ We note the easy conflation of nationality, education and ethical judgement, yet in the very next sentence, Casement invokes a concept that resonates across the twentieth century, and that continues to inform specific conflicts around social and ecological justice campaigns: 'This thing we find here is carrion – a pestilence – a crime against humanity, and the man who defends it, consciously or unconsciously, putting himself on the side of the lowest scale of humanity, and propagating a moral disease that religion and conscience and all that is upright in us should uncompromisingly denounce.'⁵¹ Casement forcefully invokes the nomenclature of human rights, in the process acknowledging and valuing the common humanity of the victims of Arana's profiteering. And this is not a minor issue; it is widely understood that the denial of humanity and subjectivity, or, at least, a significant diminution of humanity underwrote the varieties of imperial land seizure, resource extraction, enslavement, and genocide across historical sites of imperial incursion.

VI

For Richard Kirkland, both Casement's anti-colonial political imagination, as well as any retrospective assessment of his legacies in anti-colonial and/or postcolonial thought, must be appreciated in international, comparative terms. Chiming with Mitchell's location of Casement's work within the longer critical genealogy of postcolonial critique, Kirkland focuses on the analogical nature of Casement's political consciousness: 'In reconciling the various experiences

⁵⁰ Ibid., 178.

⁵¹ Ibid., 178–9.

of colonialism he witnessed, Casement found analogies irresistible and structured his entire political philosophy around them; a tendency which led inevitably to a form of postcolonial analysis in his writings. The logic of the parallels he drew between Ireland's status and the atrocities he witnessed in the Belgian Congo allowed for an analysis of the vagaries of identity formation.⁵² Kirkland is correct in his reference to the centrality of Casement's Irish nationality, and of the Irish colonial experience, to his work in both the Congo and, later, in the Putumayo. Casement constructs concrete links between his own conscientisation as an anti-colonial Irish revolutionary and the depravities of Belgian imperialism, but also suggests in his *Amazon Journal* that 'Irishness' renders one more sympathetic to the plights of oppressed communities. In this way we see analogies of historical experience and analogies of affect structuring Casement's anti-colonial consciousness. Elsewhere Kirkland re-iterates the comparative vein within Casement's anti-colonialism, but he also considers the macro-structural implications of Casement's legacy for Irish postcolonial criticism:

Casement's own history of deliberate anti-colonial agitation constitutes one of many possible starting points for such a process within Irish Studies. Just as for Prakash, Frantz Fanon and Gandhi are examples of historical figures located within anti-colonial struggle whose relationship to that struggle provides the precondition for theory, so the dissidence seemingly implicit to the Casement case should be seen as an extension of his own anti-colonial intervention. It is important to recognize that Casement's own writings on Ireland draw heavily on colonial frameworks and analogies with other colonized nations, and in this proposed their own form of ethical critique built around a narrative of decolonization.⁵³

If Kirkland's argument gestures to how Casement might be productively informative of a postcolonial-inflected Irish Studies, then the current chapter extends that inflection to include an ecocritical or environmentalist element. As a critic of a series of resource-driven imperial regimes, Casement's work

⁵² Richard Kirkland, 'Rhetoric and (Mis)recognitions: Reading Casement,' *Irish Studies Review* 7, 2 (1999), 166.

⁵³ Richard Kirkland, 'Frantz Fanon, Roger Casement and Colonial Commitment,' in Colin Graham and Glenn Hooper eds., *Irish and Postcolonial Writing: History, Theory, Practice* (Basingstoke, 2002), 54.

cannot but be read in postcolonial and ecocritical terms. The alignment of these two interlinked political and theoretical fields in Casement's work is not confined to the places and personalities of his period, but, we can suggest, anticipates and can inform equivalent contemporary struggles. In a sense, we can utilise, with Casement's imprimatur, as Kirkland argues, a qualified comparative frame of understanding to link his pioneering anti-colonialism to recent and on-going postcolonial-ecocritical theorisation and activism.

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