

Histories of 'Red Rubber' Revisited: Roger Casement's Critique of Empire

Angus Mitchell

Abstract: *The Irish literary critic Declan Kiberd has commented how the generation of Irish women and men who rebelled in 1916 against British authority in Ireland were more concerned with the future than they were with the past. Understanding the intellectual complexity of their radical critique is still work in progress. In the case of Roger Casement, it has taken a century to pass for a dialogue on human rights law and crimes against humanity to develop and prosper in order for his own achievement to be recognised. Casement's name will be forever linked with the exposé of desperate atrocities committed in the three decades before the outbreak of the first world war. The insatiable commercial demand for extractive rubber by the industrial world to nourish the next generation of transport and electrification led to an atrocity that defies measurement in terms of human suffering and environmental damage. This trans-Atlantic tragedy has in many ways defined the modern emergence of both sub-Saharan Africa and the Amazon. Retrieving the history of the rubber resource wars remains a challenge for those who contest the self-justifying narratives of western progress. At the epicentre of Casement's investigations was his nuanced critique of empire rooted in his scrutiny of racial and gender-based violence. His methods of investigation and his deeper critique of the imperial order is as relevant today – in this faltering age of globalization – as it was a century ago, when Casement faced his accusers and was executed for his challenge to imperial systems on a scaffold in central London.*

Keywords: *Roger Casement, rubber, human rights, Putumayo.*

*

'To see clearly is poetry, prophecy and religion, all in one.'

John Ruskin

The limits of history

In a dark moment, Seamus Heaney commented that it seems as if we can learn as much from history as we can from a visit to an abattoir.² The intention of this keynote address is to try and unpick and make sense of this stark, haunting comparison. The

paper is in two parts. Initially, I will speak about the wider relevance of extractive and plantation rubber to imperial strategy and to the international labour movement. I will then look explicitly at Casement's investigation of crimes against humanity as part of his critique of empire and demonstrate contemporary relevance to a human rights dialogue.

One lesson of history learned from the mid-nineteenth century tragedy of the Irish famine is how mass suffering does not convert in any straightforward way into history. It is much easier to plot the effects and consequences of the Irish famine in terms of how it shaped the years ahead than to capture the essence of the tragedy and the legacy of shame and humiliation that arose in its wake. In that sense the famine forces a rupture and might be defined as a 'limit event'. Some have argued that it marked the end of Irish history; certainly it brought about a new beginning. Like the Holocaust or the futile slaughter of the First World War, the Irish famine still defies representation. We understand it in terms of metaphor, legacy and as a signifier for the emergence of new structures of cultural and political power that ultimately brought the country to the flashpoint of 1916.

In a comparable way, the rubber resource wars that decimated the tropical regions of the Congo and Amazon and forced the clearance of hardwood forest ecosystems for a plantation economy in Southeast Asia are still in a process of assimilation. A hundred years on and it is still remarkable how little we know; perhaps how little we want to know (and by 'we' I mean the western academy). There remains a reluctance to understand and contain the amorphous nature of the tragedy and its various dimensions. The argument might be made that the modern era of what is described with that over-determined term "globalisation" was inaugurated with the late nineteenth century market for rubber. The legacy endures in the continuing struggle for the protection of the rainforest. But the endless resource wars for the next generation of raw materials and rare earths of our own age continue to ravage both river basins. The future of our hyper-consumer planet of the twenty-first century is still threatened by resource wars for any number of natural products (coltan, rare earths and, of course, fracked hydrocarbons). For those involved in the contemporary struggle, there is much to learn from the long history of rubber that might contribute to the deeper readings of the interface between social justice and environmental protection.

Historian John Tully (2011) has commented in his recent social history of rubber, *The Devil's Milk* how "the vast terrain of rubber production has always been a site of struggle." But that struggle is multi-dimensional – a many-headed hydra. It is a struggle entangled in terms of racial recognition is intrinsic to understanding the confrontations determining class, rights, working conditions and self-determination. For a few historians, it is a struggle to know what actually happened.

The obstacles in the way of knowing what actually happened are a consequence of the interconnection of these different and multiple struggles. From the perspective of the West, our tendency is to invert narratives that interfere with the triumphant sense of progress and modernity. The suffering of the subaltern is rarely the central subject of Western historiography. Consider, for instance, how the trauma of the history of slavery

mutates into the victorious history of the anti-slavery movement. As we remember to forget, so we forge a narrative that is consoling and allows us to appear at “ease with our history.” But is that just a noble fable? The centenary of 1916 and the First World War have revealed how the spectacle of commemoration constitutes an alchemical process that turns base trauma into gilt-edged triumph.

The geo-strategic vitality of rubber to modern industrial development cannot be underestimated – if oil was the bloodstream of manufacturing society then rubber was the muscle tissue. Rubber economies generated immense wealth for the new global elite. From the 1870s through to the outbreak of war in 1914 millions of lives were dependent upon the fortunes of extractive rubber. Significant areas of central Brussels, headquarters of the European Union, were built on the vast profits from that single commodity. During the First World War, the blockade of Germany and the supply of rubber hastened the end to conflict. Yet, despite its geo-strategic importance, the history of extractive rubber has been mythologised in our imagination in terms of spectacle. Beyond the cruelty of King Leopold II, the great marble palaces of Manaus and Belém or the insanity of Fitzcarraldo, there is little coherency to the narrative and its value to the industrial process of modernization.

Similarly, the plantation rubber economy that largely replaced extraction inaugurated a new colonial land grab and was paramount to the consolidation of empires in the mid twentieth century. The French in Indochina, Britain (Dunlop) in Malaya, the Dutch in Sumatra, Firestones in Liberia or Ford in the Amazon: each of these commercial ventures, whether successful or not, helped to delineate a new transnational corporate structure operating beyond normal state control. The servicing of these mega-plantations provoked the upheaval of millions of people across Asia and beyond. Imperial spheres of influence in the twentieth century were drawn and re-drawn on the back of control of this single commodity. The story of rubber is indeed a story of “glory and greed” of biblical proportions; it is also a story of acute reputational risk and market volatility.

Rubber, a founding narrative of international socialism

On another level and in opposition to that process of industrial enrichment and imperial expansion, the political economy of rubber galvanised the transnational labour movement. In that regard, it might be claimed as both a critical and formative narrative to the cause of international socialism. When considered together, the histories of extractive and plantation rubber are intrinsic to understanding slavery in its various incarnations. Part of the story relates back to the centuries of colonial coercion inaugurated by European settlement of the Americas and the long history of the transatlantic slave trade. Part of the story is entirely contemporary. Plantation rubber produced a very specific type of indentured servitude. The extractive rubber economy runs parallel to the advent of mass production and the implementation of scientific management processes. Its story is how those processes that helped build the cities of Detroit and Akron and the age of the motor car were transferred to the voiceless frontiers.

Charles Booth, one of the partners in the Booth Steamship Company that successfully opened up trade between Liverpool and the Amazon, financed his great sociological research into the demographics of poverty in London on the profits from the Amazon rubber trade. His work is recognised as an intellectual foundation stone of British socialism and the welfare state. Early twentieth century activism that sought to challenge the tyranny of venture capital emerged from the popular campaign against “red rubber”. That triangulated alliance between the Irish historian, Alice Stopford Green, the journalist and activist, E.D. Morel, and the British consul, Roger Casement, who built the pillars of the Congo Reform Association sought common political ground. They aspired to galvanise religious and political divisions around the common cause of social improvement on the periphery. Part of their vision was rooted in an evangelical tradition; another part was patently utopian.

In the background to “red rubber” is an uninterrupted genealogy that draws together social reformers, political activism, labour and union organisation and the struggles among rubber workers would also be bound up with the fusion of revolutionary nationalism and organised resistance by international labour. If we celebrate Casement and human rights, it is fitting to pay tribute to other exponents within that genealogy. Let us remember the printer and activist, Benjamin Saldaña Rocca distributing his newspapers in Iquitos; the leader of the Belgian Workers’ Party, Emile Vandervelde; “Big Bill” Haywood, leader of the Industrial Workers of the World (Wobblies) and executive member of the Socialist Party of America; the German revolutionary, Rosa Luxemburg; Peru’s Marxist philosopher, José Carlos Mariategui; Primo Levi who bore witness to the treatment of Jewish slaves at Auschwitz used in the production of synthetic rubber; Tran Tu Binh, the Vietnamese labor organiser and revolutionary; Chico Mendes, who forged the cause of social justice to the cause of environmental protection. Each of their individual interventions contributed to a deeply entangled struggle from below to establish international solidarity in the face of violent upheaval.

Turning rubber into history

While rubber may be remarkable as a substance and astonishingly versatile in terms of its scientific and manufacturing potential, it has been remarkably difficult to turn it into history. A few years ago, I reviewed a general survey history on European empires and their colonies from 1880 to 1960 by an emeritus professor of historical geography that managed to elide any reference to rubber in the index (Butlin 2009). Recent arguments on both climate change and deepening social injustice have exposed how our modern accounting methods ignore “externalities” and the wider cost of our economic system to both the environment and to wider society. Does history suffer from a similar tendency? The West has mastered what Slavoj Zizek terms “fetishistic disavowal” – our ability to actively admit the fault lines and limitations in the ideology of free-market neo-liberalism, while still righteously defending it as the only system that works. But works for whom and for how long?

In tracing the way in ways in which rubber has been processed and elided within the narrative of world history, the tensions between the orthodox authority of the discipline pitted against memory and suffering become all too clear. Michael Taussig in his study *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man: a study in terror and healing* (1987) used the entangled and unsettled legacy of the Putumayo atrocities to interrogate the supremacy of western historiography. Informed by the philosophy of Walter Benjamin, he dismissed the history that sought to show things “as they really were” as the “strongest narcotic of our time” and claimed that his interest was “not whether facts are real, but what the politics of their interpretation and representation are” (Taussig xiii). In trying to unpick the story of the Putumayo atrocities, Taussig realised that the historian, in particular, was faced by a knot of conflicting realities and factual confusions, which he identified as the “the politics of epistemic murk and the fiction of the real.”

Taussig demonstrated, too, how processing the remembrance of the violence extending from the rubber resource wars has occurred on a dimension that defies the rationalizing and controlling narratives of conventional historiography. Working through the enduring legacy of pain and suffering of the rubber economy – “the weeping wood” – and confronting that shock is on-going for the survivors. The enduring trauma is lived out on a dimension of what I term “historical visioning” that our hyper-rational western consciousness is reluctant to comprehend or even acknowledge.

This negotiation of ancestral distress is explained by the Colombian anthropologist Juan Alvaro Echeverri (2010), who makes us think about the relationship between memory and history in the context of inhumanity. Echeverri has shown how the people of the Putumayo region are still emerging from the legacy of gratuitous brutality, murder, rape, torture and widespread violation, which savaged and devastated their world. Remembrance in their vulnerable world is less about the politics of identity or the transformation of trauma into triumph, but is concerned instead with the requirement to heal and placate the unsettled spirit world. The “Basket of Darkness” is the place where memories and actions with the potential to provoke evil and do harm are buried. This “Basket of Darkness” is defined in contrast to the “Basket of Life”, where positive visions of the past, present and future are remembered, prophesied and performed. However, the “Basket of Darkness” is not a memory hole in the Orwellian sense. It is a place in a perpetual state of resettlement, repair and healing by each new generation.

Recently, the descendants of those communities whose cosmos and lifeways were ruined by the rubber resource wars of the early twentieth century, have returned to the locations where specific crimes against humanity were committed, and engaged in ceremonies and rituals intended to appease unresolved memories in the “Basket of Darkness”. It has taken a century of silence and forgetting among the survivors to reach a point where they are prepared to renegotiate the darkness. Significantly, the headquarters of the Peruvian Amazon Company in La Chorrera the administrative hub of rubber commerce has been renamed the Casa de Memoria and is now an educational establishment. In recent years it has been transformed into a place for such re-negotiation.

Shaping a Narrative: A Limit Event

Beyond the entanglement of fact, memory and commemorative spectacle, part of the problem in comprehending the impact of rubber on people and environment has been the continuing challenge to shape and frame a narrative. This is why Casement's rendering is so critical, because he bears witness with unsettling clarity to an unfathomable crime against humanity. Through his inscription of multiple and interlinking contours of testimony, he mapped a landscape of suffering overlaid with strategies of resistance. His right of intervention was based upon both his own official privileged position as a white, imperial officer and on his evolving and deliberate development of a humanist gaze. On entering Casement's interrogative landscape – the space of terror or Heaney's abattoir – we find Walter Benjamin's angel of history and that "one single catastrophe." We face, too, what the Argentine writer, Nora Strojilovich (701) calls "the confrontation between seeing, saying and writing" that complicates all atrocities.

But that single catastrophe described in Casement's extensive body of writing welds the legacy of modern Africa and South America to the subaltern narrative of Ireland's colonial relationship with England. This is much more than a straightforward "humanitarian narrative", to use Thomas Lacquer's phrase. Through the logic of his treason and in the light of his trial and execution, Casement's archive converts into an unrepentant assault on the system that reaches beyond his death to assume a contemporary relevance. To that end, his investigation merits definition as a "limit event": an historical incident of such violent, traumatic and disfiguring proportions that the cumulative tragedy dislocates the progressive historical narrative legitimising the moral economy of Western civilization.

The idea of the "limit event" as the "manifestation of the potential barbarity of modernity, as an extreme event of such uniqueness and incomparability that renders it incomprehensible," (Gigliotti 164) has principally focused on the Holocaust as the single catastrophe of the modern era, which compelled the reformulation of international law around human rights. Casement's enquiry challenged representational possibility by describing actions beyond the imaginative command of acceptable and official paradigms of history.

In defining this continuum within Casement's official life, mutating into his revolutionary turn and finally into his fragmented and irrepressible end, meaning is destabilised. He shifts between the authoritative and the unsanctioned, the private and public, the secret and the revealed. In 1903, as he returned from his investigation of the upper Congo, he produced a version of events that was intentionally official and was framed by a wider imperial narrative justifying intervention. But Casement realised that the production of such a report would ultimately serve to legitimise the system. Little was likely to change. He doubted that the British Foreign Office would be able to bring about substantive reform; any possible improvement might only come from non-governmental organisation.

With a plan in mind, he sought out E. D. Morel, Alice Stopford Green, Harry Grattan Guinness and a coterie of individuals prepared to challenge the supremacy of

power from both above and below. The Congo Reform Association was established to both supplement and supplant state agencies. It pressurised the Foreign Office and raised awareness in the public sphere through a co-ordinated press and public relations campaign.³ With the annexation of the Congo Free State in 1908 and the death of Leopold the following year, the direction of that association changed. By 1911, the Congo Reform movement had moved from its inclusive and evangelical foundation towards a commitment to engage with new shoots of European socialism. But as the prospect of war appeared on the horizon, the movement transformed into a protest against state secrecy. The claims by Morel and Casement that imperial foreign policy operated outside any democratic or transparent framework of accountable governance were claims grounded upon their knowledge of the inner workings of power.

Putumayo atrocities

Casement's Putumayo investigations in the Amazon from 1910 to 1913 coincided with this unexpected modification in the work of Congo reform. Those same years marked the paradigmatic shift in the global rubber market away from extraction towards an equally labour-intensive plantation economy in European colonial outposts in Southeast Asia. In the city of London, Casement's investigations and 1911 knighthood turned him into an internationally respected public figure. His word held weight and the ongoing scandal linking British venture capital to the Putumayo atrocities reverberated far and wide. To say with any certainty how his reports were used to influence the market is impossible to measure, but the role of narratives in both determining risk and influencing investment trade is too often ignored.

On another level, Casement used his investigation to broaden out his own critique of the interconnectedness of the Atlantic economy. His 1910 voyage opened his eyes to the devastating consequences of what happens to a region when attacked by unregulated and unaccountable venture capital, what Brazil calls *capitalismo selvagem*. As he left the Amazon at the end of that year with a substantive dossier of testimony and evidence, he connected the crimes of the Putumayo to four centuries of violence sustaining European settlement in the Americas. His return voyage to Iquitos the following year had various agendas: on an official level he went to prepare British interests up the Amazon for the impending collapse in the rubber market. But his own hope was to deliver some level of justice and implement ways of using the law to arrest the perpetrators of the atrocities.

One reason why the Putumayo atrocities, as investigated by Walt Hardenberg, Casement, Romulo Paredes and others, structures so much understanding of the Amazon rubber boom is because it is by far and away the most detailed moment recording the history of the violence underpinning that economy. It puts shape on an otherwise unfathomable and unrecorded crime against humanity stretching beyond the Amazon basin into the tropical regions of Central America and across the Atlantic into the

rainforests of sub-Saharan Africa. From the confusion of “epistemic murk” erupts a flash of insight into an atrocity of immeasurable proportion.

The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement – now translated and edited into Brazilian-Portuguese by the collective energy of Professors Laura Izarra and Mariana Bolfarine at the University of São Paulo – might be claimed as an articulate and in-depth reflective account of the treatment of the forest communities and the systems enabling what is now designated as an ethnocide. Casement structured an authoritative source not merely for defining that ethnocide, but for unmasking the racial and gender divisions underlying the structure of colonial reality. The multilayered analysis captured the extent and constitutive elements of the crime and instinctively deconstructed the interconnections of the system. He showed the criminal interdependencies which facilitated the devices of fear, violence, silence, secrecy and intimidation employed to subjugate and divide indigenous society. The controlling force of this system was the “white man”. A collective driven by market demand, equipped with the weapons of modernity and working through a complicit apparatus of governance empowered to appropriate and re-distribute land. That same “white man” had not the slightest regard for existing rights or indeed life.

Casement’s interrogation amounts to a revelation of the conceit and deceit of international commerce masquerading as civilization. This scrutiny of the “system” is what unites each phase of his official career from his twenty years in the Congo through his South American journeys to his final transgression into insurgency. He recognised that the very system was itself at the root of all evil ... “I do not accuse an individual: I accuse a system,” he wrote boldly to the Governor-General of the Congo as he exited that river in 1903.

Similarly, exposing the corruption of the “system” might be analyzed as an essential theme of *the Amazon Journal*. He comments:

I pointed out that the real criminals, in my opinion, were the supreme agents or heads who directed this system of wrong-doing, and enslavement of the Indians, and drew their profit from it, closing their eyes to the inevitable results of the application of such a system in such conditions of lawlessness – or absence of law – as prevailed on the Putumayo. (Mitchell 128)

That instinct for recognising inhumanity and its root causes extended to his identification with the oppressed condition of the neglected regions of Ireland. His campaign in Connemara in 1913 to bring relief to typhus sufferers deliberately raised the spectral signifier of the Irish famine and fused it to a transatlantic historical continuum of conquest, slavery, plantation economy and environmental degradation. With mischievous intent, he spoke of an ‘Irish Putumayo’. His revolutionary turn and his transgression from decorated public servant to incorrigible rebel contain both a transparent inner and outer logic. His ‘one bold deed of open treason’ justified that turn. And it was that logic that the authorities had to disarm and dismantle in 1916 by denying Casement the moral authority justifying his path to the scaffold.

Casement and human rights

It is important to conclude by considering Casement's relevance to contemporary universal claims. In recent years, Casement has been espoused as a "champion of human rights." But what does that actually mean? Where should he be situated within this overarching discourse of globalisation? Inside the corridors of western hegemony, human rights are still bound up with the conditionality of intangibles such as "democracy" and "freedom." But to a Palestinian child or a Syrian refugee, a human right can be reduced to something as basic and immediate as the need for clean drinking water.

While Casement used the language of "rights" in many different contexts and, most deliberately in his speech from the dock, his life was driven by a deep sense of compassion for humanity and a visceral hatred of man's inhumanity to man. He despised all forms of exploitation. For that reason, he grew to detest empires which by their very nature are structured upon hierarchies of inequality, injustice and violence. And he read the exploitation he witnessed on the frontier into the bitter entanglement of Ireland's historic ties with England. My research has revealed only two specific instances when he used the term "human rights". But both instances are revealing.

The first occurred in 1904, when writing to Liberal politician and reformist, Sir Charles Dilke, at the Anti-Slavery Society, he wrote:

It is this aspect of the Congo question – its abnormal injustice and extraordinary invasion, at this stage of civilized life, of **fundamental human rights**, which to my mind calls for the formation of a special body and the formulation of a very special appeal to the humanity of England. (Casement 17 Feb. 1904)

By 1912, during his cross-examination by the Parliamentary select committee inquiry, he used the term again: "These people have absolutely **no human rights** much less civil rights. They are hunted and chased like wild animals ... They cannot own their own bodies ..." (Casement's *Report* 2845-6).

In both contexts, he posits the notion of "human rights" as requiring legal codification. Here is an inherent and inalienable precedent for human rights for those who are vulnerable to systems that can override national mechanisms of civil protection. Casement's investigations were founded upon a sensibility of language that we can now recognise as based on a belief in the rights of humans, all humans. He purposefully inscribed a sense of humanity and human value on a people who were designated in that age as expendable and voiceless. Moreover, he realised that the authority of any appeal to human rights would ultimately rest upon historical validity. Perhaps the transcendent dimension of his achievement is how he instilled emotion and feeling into his interrogation – an emotion that is still present a hundred years after his death.

He recognised that bureaucratic language and thinking too often served to obscure and obfuscate pain and suffering. As the philosophers Richard Rorty and Martha Nussbaum have argued in different ways: the act of bearing witness, telling stories and

deepening public awareness of cruelty and oppression is integral to maintaining a structure of empathy vital to the on-going nurturing of a human rights dialogue. But that dialogue is one that moves beyond empty box-ticking and into decisive and empathetic action.

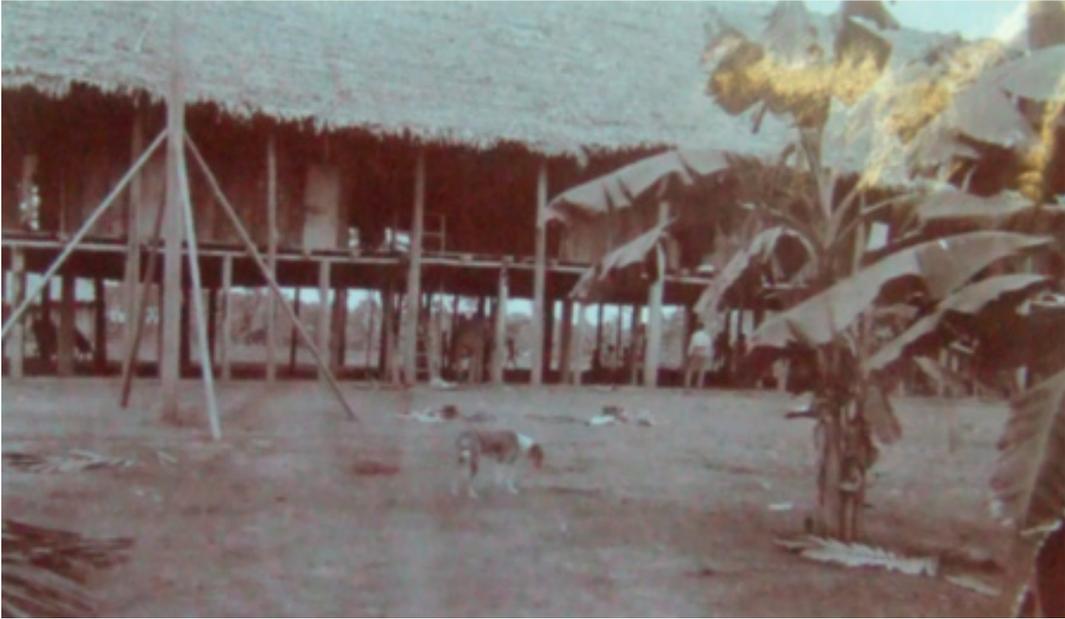
Casement remains in many ways our contemporary. His critique of and stand against empire and his denunciation of untrammelled commerce rightly continues to inspire interventions in our own time. That deep interrogation of power – of the system – and his holistic comprehension of right and wrong and good and evil is as germane to the world of the early twenty-first century as it was to the twentieth. Great efforts have been made to forget, or at least render unintelligible the true dimensions of the tragedy of “red rubber”, but this interdisciplinary symposium and the extraordinary flood of interest in Roger Casement in 2016 demonstrate that the flame still flickers even if the blaze of indignation is gone. By the light refracted through the prism of his life we can perceive the corrosive boundaries of history upon which Seamus Heaney’s abattoir is structured.

Notes

- 1 Keynote Lecture delivered at the opening of the international conference “Roger Casement: A Human Rights Celebration 1916-2016”, University of California, Davis 13 October 2016.
- 2 Quoted by Eva Hoffman, ‘The Balm of Recognition: Rectifying Wrongs through the generations’, in Nicholas Owen ed., *Human Rights, Human Wrongs*. Oxford: OUP, 2003. 282.
- 3 For a recent history see Dean Pavlakis, *British Humanitarianism and the Congo Reform Movement 1896-1913*. Farnham, Ashgate, 2015.

Works Cited

- Butlin, Robin A. *Geographies of Empire: European Empires and Colonies c. 1880-1960*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Casement, Roger. RH Antislavery papers, S22/G261 vol. II, Roger Casement to Sir Charles Dilke, 17 February 1904.
- _____. *Report and Special Report by the Select Committee on Putumayo* [1913], Minutes of Evidence.
- Echeverri, Juan Álvaro. “To heal or to remember: Indian Memory of the Rubber Boom and Roger Casement’s ‘Basket of Life’.” *ABEI: The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies*, 12, November 2010, 49-64.
- Gigliotti, Simone. “Unspeakable pasts as Limit Events: the Holocaust, Genocide, and the Stolen Generations”, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 49:2 (2001): 164-181.
- Mitchell, Angus (ed.). *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement*. London: Anaconda Editions, 1997.
- Strejilevich, Nora. “Testimony: Beyond the Language of Truth” in *Human Rights Quarterly*, The John Hopkins UP, 6. 3, (2006): 701-713
- Tully, John. *The Devil’s Milk: A Social History of Rubber*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011.
- Taussig, Michael. *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*. Chicago, 1987.



Rubber Station – *Matanzas*