



Michiles, Aurélio; Bolfarine, Mariana; Izarra, Laura P. Z. (Eds.). *Segredos do Putumayo: O diário da Amazonia de Roger Casement*. São Paulo: Colmeia, 2020.

It is great to see that discussions on genocide, enslavement, massacres and ethnocide of Amerindians in South America have increased lately. Here we would like to refer specifically to the Indigenous population of the Amazon in the area between Putumayo River and the Caquetá River, a region in the border of Brazil, Peru and Colombia, who suffered under the hands of the *Peruvian Amazon Company*. At this moment, when we see that slavery, genocide and massacre of Indigenous people is still a common practice in the Amazon it is urgent to discuss the matter. Books, films, videos documentary will never be too much! We really need to pay attention to what is going on with these people and it is very urgent to discuss human and nature rights.

Segredos do Putumayo is a book, written in Portuguese,¹ entitled after the documentary film *The Secrets from Putumayo* (83'), directed by Aurélio Michiles. The documentary is based on Roger Casement's journal (*Amazon Journal of Roger Casement*) which was released in 2020 but due to the pandemic, it was nationally released in September 2022. Since then, the film has been praised and awarded in Festivals in Brazil and abroad. Besides, it has warned scholars, students in the Amazon and in the world about the crimes committed against Amerindians caused by the extractive system of rubber.

Michiles's documentary is based on research developed on the life of Roger Casement (1864-1916), an Irish man considered to be the pioneer of international human rights inquiries. Casement's work in Africa, Brazil and his native Ireland still have repercussions today. In 1910, Casement was the British Consul General in Rio de Janeiro/Brazil when he undertook an investigation into accusation of crimes against Amerindian communities in the Region of Putumayo, Peru-Colombia. The violent crimes against the Putumayo people were practiced by the British-registered *Peruvian Amazon Company*. In this context, Michiles' documentary is narrated following Casement's journals; recounting the horrific treatment against native people, Casement revealed that the rubber extraction by the British company was responsible for killings and slave labor in the midst of the Amazon rainforest.

Mariana Bolfarini and Laura Izarra's book offers the reader good information on the production of the film widening our understanding of the documentary. The book *Segredos do Putumayo* opens the opportunity for the reader not only to know about the production of the film, but, much more than this, it gives the reader the opportunity to deepen her or his knowledge about the whole context of Roger Casement's life and his connection to the Amazon and the Amerindian from the Putumayo region during the rubber extraction in the beginning of the twentieth Century.

In her presentation of the book, Mariana Bolfarine and Laura Izarra inform us that the Cátedra de Estudos Irlandeses W.B. Yeats has been developing research projects, courses, publications and exhibitions about Roger Casement, his life and work, aiming to disclose the presence of Casement in Brazil and the whole Amazon. By reading the book, the reader learns that Casement is nowadays acknowledged by the Amerindians who survived from the massacre. We learn that Casement worked in order to be able to reveal to the world the colonial atrocities of the Rubber company and the appalling human cost of the rubber industry. The preface written by Stephan Rea, who took part in the documentary, highlights the film and tells us more about Casement as a diplomat and a man invested by the best sense of justice and humanity.

Mentioning Casement and his work of resistance, Rea affirms that “no empire will ever be destroyed without resistance” stating that Casement's resistance was not only a military resistance, but also cultural one. By telling the process of filming *Secrets* and interviewing the people who took part in the production and the Indigenous people who still feel the ghost of that brutal system of rubber extractive system, the film director Michiles lets us have a broader comprehension of that massacre. He offers us a relevant look to be appreciated by readers.

In his chapter “Filmando Segredos” or “Filming secrets” Aurélio Michiles, a man from Manaus tells the reader about his life, his career, his origins and the significance of “rubber” in the Amazon. He lets us know about the interest in Casement's life and his struggle to produce the documentary, his trip to Putumayo, La Chorera, the contact with the Amerindian people, including some pictures.

The interview with Angus Mitchell by Aurélio Michiles is very significative as he discusses Casement's role in the Irish revolutionary movement, playing a central role in the Irish Voluntaries. About Casement's report on the Amazon, Mitchel suggests that it got its own life, as a “Master's stroke of subversion” against the British Empire.

The chapter “Voices from La Chorera” offers us the opportunity to listen to voices not heard in other times. The interviews with leaders of Amerindian communities in the

region of Putumayo make the book very interesting. As one leader says, the Indigenous lost their blood because of the milk of the tree. In some interviews we learn about slavery and how some Indigenous people beat their own fellows in their own communities. As the reader is informed “it was the Indigenous land, but the rubber trees belonged to Arana,” Amerindians say, referring to Julio Cesar Arana the owner of *Peruvian Amazon Company* and considered the baron of the rubber. We also learn about the everyday life of people in the region, and how “Casa Arana” nowadays is kept as a school. The place of massacre is a place for educating the people.

Luz Marina Zaita, a Uitoto woman leader, asserts that “the rubber holocaust” occurred because “the majority of our people, we can say 80% to 90% of our *abuelos* (grandparents), of the clans, were enslaved and killed in this territory of La Chorrera, on the banks of the Caraparaná river.” And she adds: “we are the last one of the resistance”.

In his interview to Aurélio Michiles, Milton Hatoum contends that Casement’s journals are different from journals at that time because they do not carry stereotyped concepts about the Indigenous people and about the Amazon; Casement has a more anthropological view of the other. Hatoum refers to Casement’s project as a humanitarian project, because it warned humanity to pay attention to “the other.” Milton Hatoum relates the journals with literary pieces such as Euclides da Cunha’s *The Amazon* and *The Lost Paradise* and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

Angus Mitchel, speaking about the Rubber boom, affirms that the mark of the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 inaugurates the extractive system in the Amazon because it helped the British Empire in its commercial transactions. These transitions opened the possibility to exploit and enslave people such as in Putumayo. Angus mentions the importance of Casement in denouncing the atrocities and makes references to filmic productions at that time, which did not reveal the exploitation of people, but just on the contrary were produced to hide the crimes of the Rubber Companies, as is the case of Silvino Santos’ film sponsored by Arana.

Esther Hamburger in her chapter “Life is Fragile” mentions the importance of Michiles’s film in order to reveal the necessity nowadays, but it is also a challenge: how to approach violence without contributing to reproduce discrimination in a visual way? How to contribute to the imagination of new relationships, or, on the other hand, ignore the disastrous marks inscribed on broken, burned, violated bodies? Yes, it is a great challenge.

We are very happy to have a book such as *Segredos do Putumayo* as we can realize that more people are warned about the necessity to respect the history of the people in the Amazon. In our time, when we see extermination of the communities,

when it is possible to realize the government's total disrespect for Indigenous peoples, the abandonment imposed on those living in frontier areas of South America, books, films, documentaries, reports can sound like a cry. A cry for us to stop and look with more respect at their history, their culture, their lives. That is why we can say *Segredos do Putumayo* brings a new contribution to a broader understanding of the Amazon, its history, its cultures and its people.

Miguel Nenevé and Hélio Rocha

Notes

- ¹ The English version is *Secrets from Putumayo* by Aurélio Michiles. Eds. Mariana Bolfarine and Laura P. Z. Izarra. São Paulo: Outside Co., 2021. 104 pp.