

Mr Casement goes to Washington: The Politics of the Putumayo Photographs

Jordan Goodman

Abstract: *It is well-known that when Roger Casement left the Putumayo in November 1910, he took with him several Barbadian men, two Huitoto youths and a bundle of depositions documenting in extraordinary detail the atrocities committed by the Peruvian Amazon Company. What is far less known (and we have to thank Angus Mitchell for directing our attention to it in his publications) is that he also had with him a camera and several rolls of film waiting to be developed. Unfortunately only a handful of the photographs Casement had developed have survived. They lie in a box in the National Photographic Archive in Dublin, dormant and seemingly historically inert. Thankfully, the historicity of these images can be reconstructed, for in March 1912, when it looked as though the American government was backsliding in its promise of putting political pressure on the Peruvian government to protect the Indians and to stop the brutal labour regime in the rubber lands of the Putumayo, Casement posted copies of a number of these photographs to George Young at the British Embassy in Washington to shock the American administration into action. All of these photographs (which are in the National Archives in Washington, DC) were personally annotated by Casement, in the manner of an atrocity narrative, and provide a rare insight into the political possibilities of the visual image.*

Roger Casement was no stranger to Manaus. It was the Amazonian city he visited most. How much he knew about it is not clear but he certainly didn't like it. Indeed, he didn't seem to like any place on the Amazon he visited, all the way from Pará to Iquitos thousands of kilometres up river.

Casement passed through or stayed in Manaus, if even just to change ships, on six occasions: twice in 1908, on his way to and from the site of the Madeira-Mamoré railroad construction; twice again in 1910, on his way to and from the Putumayo and Iquitos, to investigate, on behalf of the British Foreign Office, allegations of violence and brutality in the way a British-based firm, the Peruvian Amazon Company, headed by the Peruvian business man, Julio César Arana, was extracting rubber from the forest – Casement was then a guest of the company's own Commission of Inquiry; and finally, twice in 1911, to and from his second and last visit to Iquitos and the Amazon River.



What Casement did after he left the mouth of the Amazon on 24 December 1911, forms the backdrop to my main in this article, which is the use of photographs not just as the means by which experiences are described and recorded, but more importantly as instruments of political standpoints and action. The Putumayo atrocity, I would contend, was one of the first genocides in which photographs were used in the battle over what really happened, to convince the public to take sides over competing and contradictory facts and interpretations.

The Putumayo as the scene of the interaction between indigenous people, recent outsiders and rubber attracted a short but intense photographic interest. Between 1903 and 1913, six prominent Europeans captured the scene photographically – they were, in order of appearance, the French explorer, Eugène Robuchon, followed by Thomas Whiffen (an English adventurer), Henry Gielgud (Secretary of the Peruvian Amazon Company), Roger Casement, Stuart Fuller (the American Consul in Iquitos) and finally Silvino Santos (the Manaus-based photographer hand-picked and commissioned by Arana). Selections of the photographs were published in a number of places between 1907 and 1914. Robuchon’s photographs appeared primarily in his own posthumously published book (1907) and in Sidney Paternoster’s *The Lords of the Devil’s Paradise* (1913); Whiffen’s photographs were reproduced in his own book, published in 1915, and in Walter Hardenburg’s *The Putumayo: The Devil’s Paradise* (1912). Henry Gielgud’s photographs also made it into Hardenburg’s book. Silvino Santos was the source of a number of photographs that illustrated a number of books that came out of the Arana camp in 1913 and 1914, especially Carlos Rey de Castro’s books in 1913 and 1914. Stuart Fuller’s photographs, which were primarily topographical, were never published. And neither, significantly, were Casement’s.

Thanks to Angus Mitchell's exemplary research into Casement's time in the Putumayo, we know that Casement had a camera with him (it is now in the National Museum of Ireland) and that he took many rolls of film, some of which were developed, and the photographs disbursed. Of the unknown total of photographs he took, only a small number have survived and these are in the National Photographic Archive in Dublin.

Everything I have said so far is well-known to students of Casement and of the Putumayo atrocity itself. What, to my mind, is not known is that a selection of Casement's Putumayo photographs also made it to Washington, DC, to the State Department. I will refer to them in my paper as the Washington photographs. They are contained in a box at the National Archives in Washington DC, amongst a substantial number of papers, most of which eventually ended up being published as the US government's official response to the Putumayo tragedy under the title *Slavery in Peru*, 1913.

What makes these photographs so valuable is that they give us a unique insight into Casement's humanitarian consciousness in a rather remarkable way. If we take all of the Putumayo photographs that have survived, those that have been published and those that remain in archival and private hands, I think that with the exception of Casement's own, they fall quite neatly into three groups. The first and not surprisingly the largest group is what we could call the ethnographic class, a familiar type of photography from the late nineteenth century onwards, in which the European gaze is on the other and its distinct otherness: photographs of rituals, dances, bodies (particularly tattooing and other forms of body painting, and what the onlooker might call selective mutilation), as well as contextual topography and material culture. There is a lot of this kind of photography in Whiffen, Gielgud, Robuchon, Fuller and Santos. The second group is representative of what has come to be called atrocity photographs, normally associated with the images of the Holocaust during the Second World War, but also evident here. How many such photographs were taken is clearly unknown but a few have survived. Robuchon may have taken many atrocity photographs (certainly rumours in Iquitos at the time was that he had done just that and may have paid for it with his life) but only one or two survive, one especially showing an Indian youth being flogged, which appears as the frontispiece of Paternoster's book. Walter Hardenburg, the American engineer, who first brought the Putumayo atrocity to public attention when he arrived in London from Iquitos in the summer of 1909, made the greatest use of these, using an image of four chained Indian rubber gatherers as his frontispiece.

I should add a word or two about two other atrocity photographs, one of which could have been published at the time and wasn't, but has been reproduced more recently, and another that was published at the time (on at least two occasions) and reproduced on several, and more recent, occasions.



The first photograph, not published at the time, shows the back of a Huitoto youth, with clear signs of scarring from whipping. I would like to quote directly from a letter Casement sent to Alfred Mitchell Innes at the British Embassy in Washington and subsequently forwarded on to Henry Janes at the Division of Latin American Affairs in the US State Department. "It is an enlarged copy of a Kodak photo of a young Indian boy on the Putumayo," writes Casement, "showing some of the scars on his boyish limbs – given with the tapir hide for not bringing in his quota of rubber to the slavers... I want you to show this photo to the President if you can. Give it to him from me, and say it is only one of the hundreds of victims... The boy was climbing a tree when we saw his stern parts first; he was sent up to get an orchid for the botanist and he cried out at the scarred limbs exposed as the little chap went up the tree, and photo'd him when he came down." This photograph, which was actually taken by Henry Gielgud, the Secretary of the Peruvian Amazon Company, who was with Casement in the Putumayo, also went to the Foreign Office in London in the hope that it would be published, as Mitchell Innes in Washington suggested, alongside Casement's reports of his investigation into the Putumayo atrocities, the so-called Blue Book. Despite Mitchell Innes and Casement's own arguments for publication, the Foreign Office, including Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary, took a different view, arguing that "the report speaks sufficiently eloquently without the need of pictorial representation." It was not published.

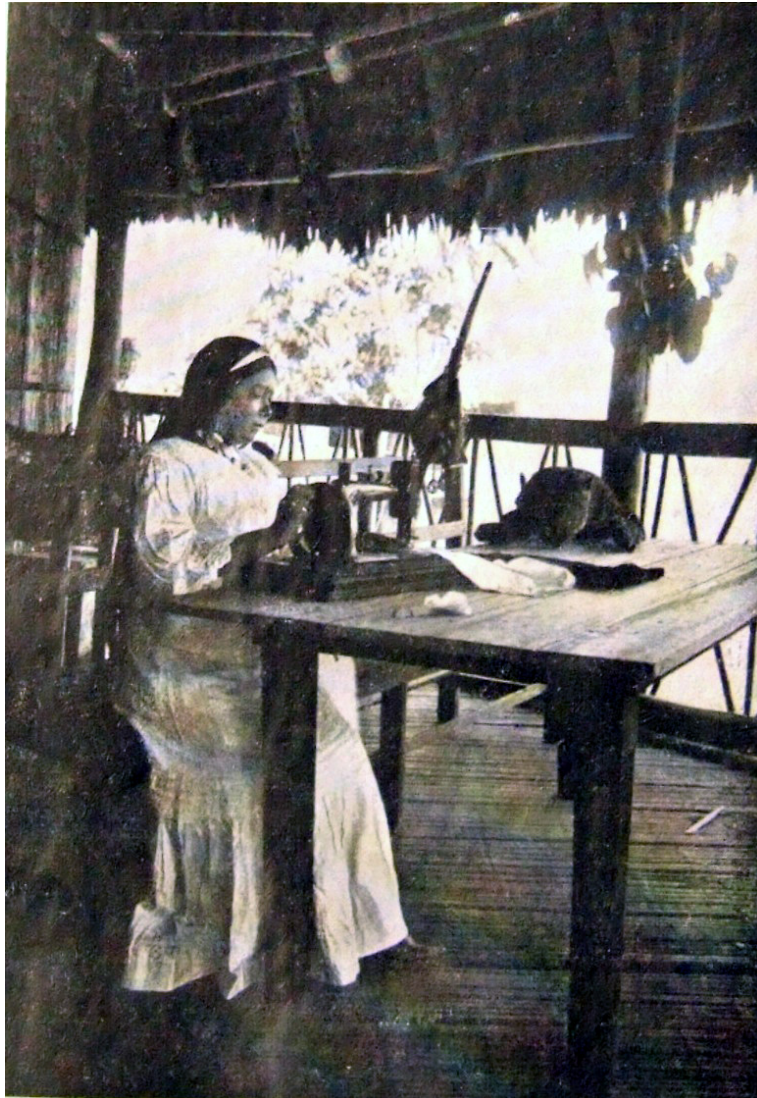
The second of these atrocity photographs and perhaps the most harrowing one shows an old woman, emaciated, and perhaps dying (a contemporary letter from the British Consul in Iquitos, on the word of the photographer, says that she was already dead) in a hammock. Her vacant gaze stares into an indeterminate space, but the eye of the onlooker, anxious to avert her eyes, is nevertheless drawn into the horror of the scene.



The photograph appeared in a Lima magazine, *Variedades*, at the end of August 1912. The magazine's editor explained that the photograph had been sent to him, anonymously, from Iquitos. We now know, however, that the photograph was widely distributed by the then Prefect of Iquitos, Alejandro Alayza y Paz Soldán, to *Variedades*, to the American and British Consul in Iquitos, who were asked to forward it on to the State Department and the Foreign Office respectively, and to Roger Casement himself. Paz Soldán wanted it to be published in an appropriate English illustrated newspaper, such as the *Illustrated London News*. The memorandum from Paz Soldán, attached to both the American and British despatches, reveals that the captain of a Peruvian expeditionary force sent to investigate rumours of atrocities against Indians committed by Colombian *caucheros* beyond the boundary of the Peruvian Amazon Company had taken the photograph. The woman, according to this same captain, had managed to get word to the Peruvian authority in the Putumayo that her people were being abused, and when the expeditionary force got to the area they found her, after having been starved to

death in revenge, lying dead in the hammock. The photograph, the memorandum continued, was proof that it was Colombians, not Peruvians, who were committing the atrocities. Casement's minute and painful investigation of the Putumayo atrocities, the famous Blue Book, had been published in London three days before Paz Soldán handed the photograph and its explanation over to the two consuls in Iquitos.

The rest of the Putumayo images fall into a final group that I would like to call denial photographs. Silvino Santos, whom Julio César Arana had hired to accompany a tour of the Putumayo in August 1912, took all of them. One example shows an Indian woman making her own clothes on the veranda of a building using a Singer sewing machine. Carlos Rey de Castro, in whose book the image was reproduced, explained that this woman, before the arrival of the Peruvian Amazon Company in the area, was nude and tattooed. The company, Castro went on to say, was a civilizing force and this photograph supported his contention.



Now, as I mentioned before, Casement's Washington photographs do not fit into any of these groups. They are not ethnographic, nor atrocity, and certainly not denial photographs. They are in a class of their own. They are images meant to convey the meaning of what it means to be human, or, to put it another way, what humanity is.

When he was in Pará at the end of 1911, having returned from a second visit to Iquitos, Casement decided and without warning to his superiors in London, that instead of returning directly to Britain he would go to the United States, and particularly to Washington, DC, to press his case for a greater involvement of the American government in the diplomatic process – to force Peru to protect its indigenous population and to stop Arana, including bringing charges against the perpetrators of the crimes Casement had documented.

While he was in Washington, in the early part of January 1912, Casement had productive meetings with officials at the State Department and even managed, with the help of the British Ambassador, to spend some time talking to William Howard Taft, the President of the United States. Casement stayed in the USA for nearly three weeks and left feeling pleased with his decision to go. When he arrived in London and told the Foreign Secretary what he had done, he, too, according to Casement, was delighted.

At some point (it is not clear when this was) Casement started thinking of putting together a portfolio of photographs to strengthen the case he had put to the State Department. All we know for sure is that the portfolio, together with a detailed annotation of each photograph, was sent on 26 January 1912 and that the package arrived at the State Department's Bureau of Latin American Affairs not long after that.

The portfolio consisted of thirty-four photographs, each of which, as I just said, was explained in an accompanying text covering twelve foolscap pages. Anyone who has had the pleasure of reading Casement's voluminous paper trail will not be surprised to learn that the text is anything but scanty. Indeed, over the length of it, Casement produced not so much an explanation as a narrative of events through which he caught the juxtaposition of humanity and inhumanity.

The photographs appear below in the order they were meant to be seen. My comments on them generally take the form of paraphrases of Casement's words; for a small number of the images I have used Casement's words *verbatim*. Casement deliberately and poignantly provides portraits of what are meant to be easily recognizable people with whom one can readily empathize, while narrating a story of abuse, brutality and murder.



Two Andoke boys. They had just arrived with their loads of rubber. Casement mentions that “this tribe, once numerous, is now reduced all told to probably 150 persons, murdered by Armando Normand (one of the rubber station managers).”



Youth carrying a load of rubber.



Casement weighed the loads that these youths were carrying and estimated their weight at 75 kilos each. The Indians carried them over a distance of 100kms without food being given.



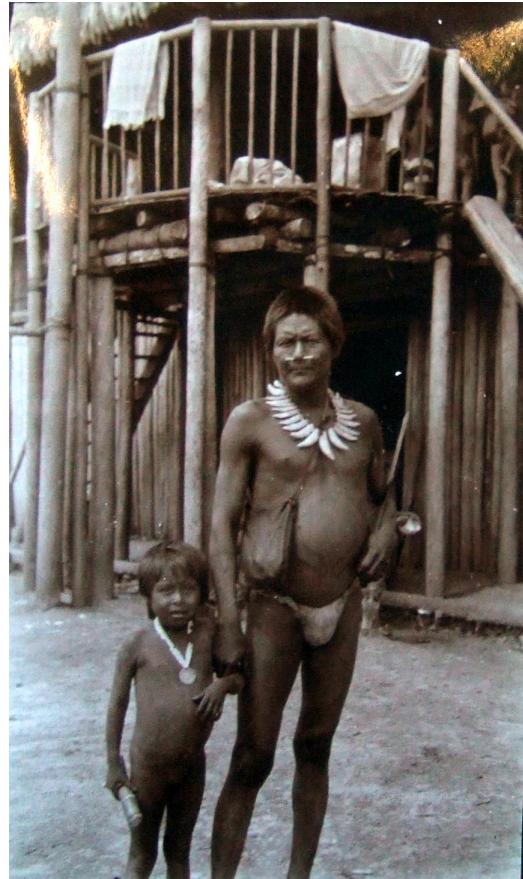


This tribal chief told Casement about the murder of one of his family by a form of water torture (which often ended in death) for not bringing in enough rubber. The murderer was Fidel Velarde, another rubber station manager.



Another tribal chief who was with the previous one. Casement notes here that Velarde has “escaped.”

Casement writes: “Another Chief and his baby girl. This man came at Entre Rios [a rubber station] to denounce the murdering of his people – he was then removed – I never saw him after the day he had the courage to speak out.”



This photo shows another tribal chief beating the MANGUARÉ, used by the indigenous people to send signals through the forest. Casement notes about this man that “he was a great friend of mine and had a fine wit too – and when he found a whiteman who was not a rubber gatherer but one who came to talk and be a friend of the Indians, his opinions poured forth, and revealed a witty mind.”



“Three Huitoto Indian men of the district of Ultimo Retiro . . . These are the “last of their tribe.” It was once a populous clan – and the whole district of Ultimo Retiro had, some few years back (say 1900), 5000 Indians – it has now less than 600 all told.”



An Indian from the Atenas rubber station.

Four youths from the Sur rubber station after bringing in their loads of rubber.

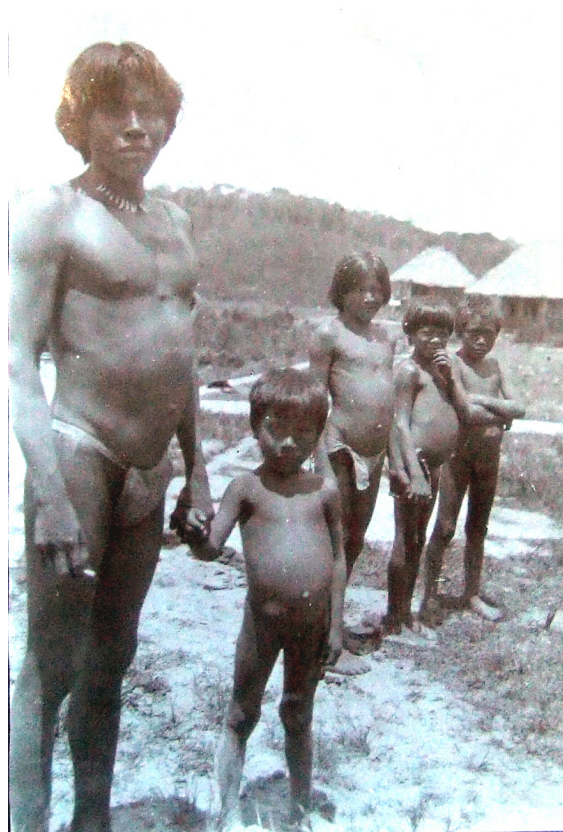


“A Huitoto youth preparing for a dance – all the Indians love dancing but now are rarely permitted to hold one.” Casement points out in regards to this photo that this youth carried Casement’s baggage through the forest, for which Casement paid him – “the first instance of an Indian of the Putumayo being paid for his work.” “They get hideous trousers and skirts – not worth a dime each – in return for months of rubber working.” The *caucheros* told Casement that they never paid the Indians because they, that is the *caucheros*, found it demoralizing.





This photo shows an Indian father and son just after they deposited their loads of rubber. The key word here is “their.” Casement continues: “I saw many children this size carrying loads, toddling along beside, their poor sacrificed ‘pappa and mamma’ – with their huge loads. The whole family had to take part in getting [the rubber] down to the station – a trip of 100 kms.”



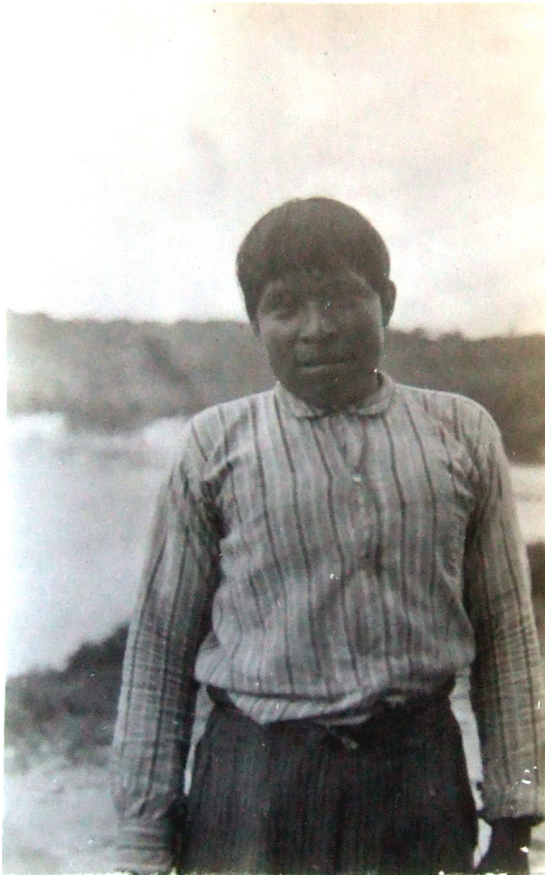
Same parent and child.



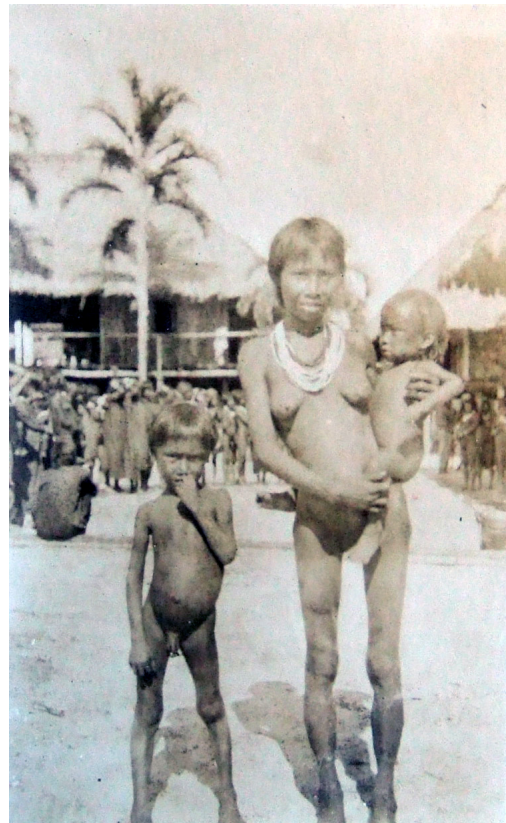
Young boys who were with the others carrying down the rubber. Casement notes that “babies must be carried too – because if left behind they would starve to death.”



More of the small boys helping to get their parents’ loads of rubber to the station. “All had been flogged,” Casement writes, “their buttocks and thighs were scarred all over.”



Casement entitled this photo “The Last of the Tribe.” This was a Huitoto youth, about nineteen years old, and the last member of his clan. Casement goes on to explain that the Indians he met in the Putumayo had exceedingly “clean bodies,” (his words), “their skin was radiant and their hair luxuriant”; and then continues “and I would add in their minds until debased or corrupted by the “blancos.”



I quote from Casement: “An Indian mother and two children. She has been so worked without food that her limbs have shrunk. I saw far worse specimens than these.”

Again Casement's words: "An Atenas [a rubber station] Indian – the whole of the population of this district had been systematically starved to death by Elias Martenengui (this man was in Callao and the Lima government deliberately warned him to 'escape' when the warrant for his arrest came from Iquitos, and then assured our minister he had got away). Martenengui worked his whole district to death, and gave the Indians no time to plant or find food. They had to work rubber or be killed, and to work and die . . . [they are] walking fragments of humanity . . . [I was] filled with rage, indignation and disgust." "This Indian," Casement notes, "in addition to having been denied the right to get food had been ruthlessly flogged. His backside had been cut to pieces. I tried to photograph him backwards but could not get the snapshot, as he went away, turning round upon me a face of anger and hate. No wonder – I was another whiteman, another murderer, another enslaver, to him."



"A man of 35 or 40, flogged and abjectly cowed," writes Casement.

This is a photograph of a 14 or 15 year old Huitoto youth. Casement says that in this image he was wearing his "Sunday best." "What you can't see," Casement adds, "is that his back was scored with broad and deep scars."



These are four youths about the same age as the youth in the previous image. They were part of a group of forty Indians who had been ordered to carry the white visitors' baggage through the forest from one station to another, a distance of almost twenty miles. They were, Casement notes, "the most abject specimens of humanity I have ever seen."

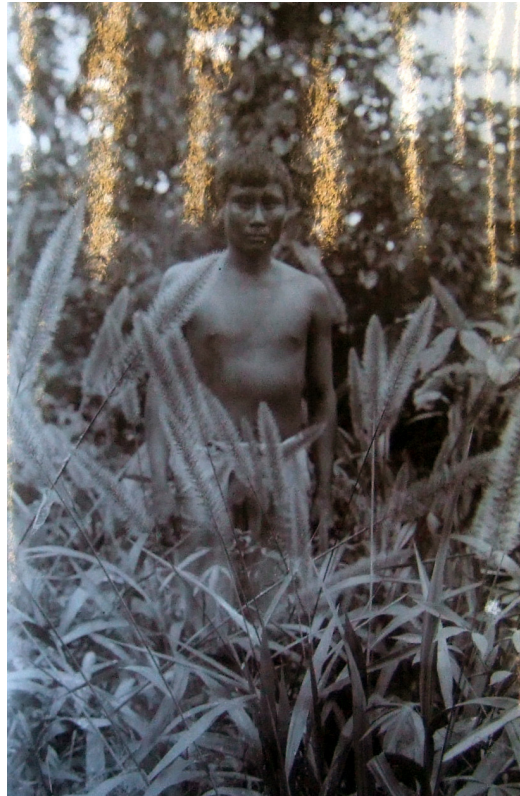


For this photograph, Casement asked the youths to turn around so that their scars from the lash could be seen. This and the previous photograph were taken not by Casement, but by Louis Barnes, the head of the Commission.

The next three photographs are of women dressed for their dance.



By this photograph, Casement means to convey another aspect of the terrorism behind Arana's regime. This is a "muchacho de confianza," Casement explains, "a criminal Indian enrolled and trained as boys for the whiteman. Their primary function was that of terrorists, spies and executioners. This boy has killed many Indians, his own countrymen."



This is a photograph of the rubber station called Matanzas, the name, Casement understood, perfectly suited to the murderous regime of its manager Armando Normand, whom Casement had met and thought the greatest criminal of them all. Casement notes that behind the pleasant setting the most unspeakable acts were carried out against the Indians. I'll spare you the details.



This photograph is, in many ways, one of the most important of the collection. As Casement explains, this is an image of Arédomi, one of the two youths he had taken from the Putumayo and who stayed with him in London for just under two months. The photograph, Casement writes, was taken in Dorset on the estate of the Duke of Hamilton. As one can clearly see, Arédomi is thriving. Casement asks his State Department colleagues to compare this image with the one of the four starving Indian youths, suffering in Atenas in the Putumayo on Arana's land. Casement's point is obvious.



These three photographs are the only ones in the set that are not of people. Casement's purpose in placing them here is to emphasize the peaceful nature of the Amazonian environment in deep contrast to the brutality of the inhumanity that was practised in these majestic forests.



In this photograph you can see two men, the one with the back to us is Andean while the one facing the lens is Huitoto. The latter's name was Julio. According to Casement Julio had been sold as a slave in Iquitos. We learn nothing more of this and Casement ends his note by remarking that he does not know what became of him.

This is the last photograph in the set. This image, of a Campas Indian from the Upper Ucuyali, Casement uses, as he did that of Arédomi, to insist that it is Arana's system that is reducing the Indians to a state of inhumanity, both physically and mentally; by contrast, this youth, "belonged" to a Peruvian Civil Engineer who, according to Casement, was very kind to him, and was in good shape even though he was virtually a slave. Casement ends his annotation with the following words: "Without her Indians, there is no Peru! And yet these people are so criminally shortsighted that they are raiding and murdering wholesale the bulk of those who should be citizens of the Republic. Peru has many people – and very few citizens!"



When Casement was in the Putumayo, seeing for himself the evidence of brutality that he had read in the papers that both the Foreign Office and the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society shared with him, he had difficulty finding the right words to capture the horror. He tried various formulations including “syndicate of crime,” “reign of terror,” and “piracy and terrorization.” On 5 October 1910, after having been in the Putumayo for two weeks, and after having visited the first of several rubber stations, where he first saw the punishment stocks, the regime’s favourite weapon of control and submission, in which recalcitrant Indians were imprisoned for as much as months in unbearably painful ways, Casement, in an extended entry in his diary, concluded that it was the system that was the crime, not the criminals who administered it. And then, through this deep analysis, he found the words he was desperately searching for. “This thing we find here,” Casement noted in his diary that day, “is a crime against humanity.”

Now, that phrase, “crime against humanity” is so familiar today, so used (perhaps even over-used) in the media and in common parlance, that it comes as something of a surprise to learn that one hundred years ago when Casement used it, it had not yet appeared in print.

That is one important point but the other is no less significant. For Casement used the phrase in precisely the way it was enshrined by the International Criminal Court of the United Nations after World War II and is used today: that is, the systematic practice of inhumane acts – murder, enslavement, extermination, torture, and so on – committed against any civilian population.

I would argue that for Casement to have constructed the phrase “a crime against humanity” he must have had a deep understanding and thought a lot of what he meant by humanity. These photographs, together with the running text, I believe, support my contention. Casement’s narrative successfully and provocatively, and yet subtly, cuts across and through meanings of humanity and inhumanity. It is a complex, and quite modern, discourse, something we have grown to understand about Casement’s intellect.

Notes

Full citations to the archival material on which this article is based, including that of the photographs themselves, can be found in Jordan Goodman, *The Devil and Mr. Casement*. London & New York: Verso, 2009 & 2010.