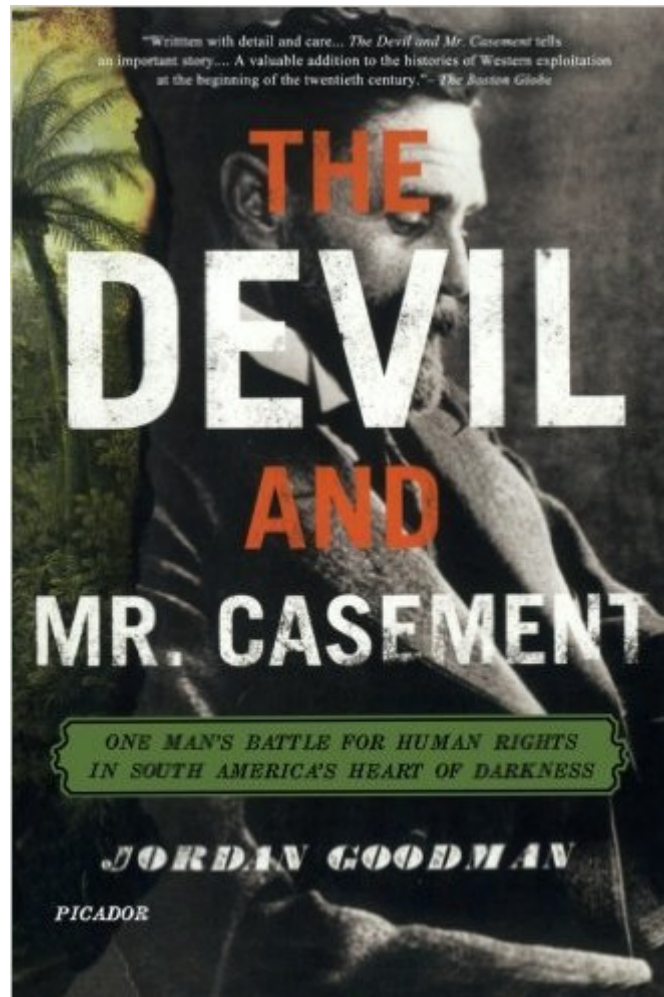


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The Devil And Mr. Casement: One Man's Battle For Human Rights In South America's Heart Of Darkness



Synopsis

In September 1910, the activist Roger Casement arrived in the jungle on a mission for the British government: to investigate reports of widespread human-rights abuses in the forests along the Putumayo River. Casement was outraged by what he uncovered: nearly thirty thousand Indians had died to produce four thousand tons of rubber for Peruvian and British commercial interests, under the brutal rubber baron Julio César Arana. In 1912, Casement's seven-hundred-page report of the Putumayo violence set off reverberations throughout the world. Drawing on a wealth of original research, *The Devil and Mr. Casement* is a haunting story of modern capitalism with enormous contemporary political resonance.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In 1909 the muckraking British journal TRUTH printed allegations that a British registered, but Peruvian controlled, rubber company was enslaving native workers in the Putumayo region of Peru. The demand and price of rubber was increasing with the rise of the automobile industry. Julio Cesar Arana (1864-1952) obtained a concession in the Peruvian in which to harvest the native rubber trees. Unfortunately this required significant labor to find the trees in the jungle, to tap the trees and to transport the rubber through the jungle to navigable rivers. The central allegation was that the overseers recruited by Arana had enslaved the natives to perform these services, essentially without compensation or even food, by means of violence, rape and murder. Arana had floated a British company on the London Stock Exchange to conduct these operations.

Consequently the publication of the allegations put the both the British government and the British Directors of the company, all of whom claimed ignorance, in a sensitive position. A company commission was sent to Peru in 1910 to investigate. Attached to the commission was Roger Casement (1864-1916), a British diplomat, who had been central to the investigation of similar conditions in the Belgium Congo in 1904. The material in this book is quite fascinating. The author, Jordan Goodman, offers brief histories of Arana and the evolving rubber industry. However the bulk of the book is the history of how the allegations reached Britain, how the material came to be published and its political implications. The latter is interesting inasmuch as the Company was British, the operations were in Peru and the latter was recognized as being within the American sphere of influence (i.e. Monroe Doctrine).

In reading around in the corners of history you come across all kinds of interesting tidbits. The life of Roger Casement is one of those. While the details of the horrific rubber trade in the South America have been well portrayed in such books as Wade Davis' One River so don't need retelling, the role of Casement in their expose' makes an good story but maybe a bit too detailed for other than a professional historian. None-the-less, I enjoyed Goodman's book, but a couple of weeks after finishing it I wonder what it has added to the stock of knowledge I can retain. What stands out is not the center of the authors focus: yes, the oft repeated horrors inflicted on the natives was hard to read---yet I already knew that, and the details of the governmental processes in England were not so interesting. The devil, in this case the rubber baron Arana, emerges out of the whole incidence vindicated in his belief that no matter what Casement revealed, he could continue his exploitation of Indian rubber collectors. So Casement had a moral victory (without any British legislation to prevent business involvement in other foreign crimes) but did not prevent mistreatment in Peru from continuing. The come-uppance of the rubber trade was eventually the domination of plantations in South East Asia, and Arana was undone by business rather than punishment for his crimes. So what sticks in my mind? It is Casement's treason against the Crown in seeking German aid for Irish independence during WWI.

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