

The Butterfly Collector

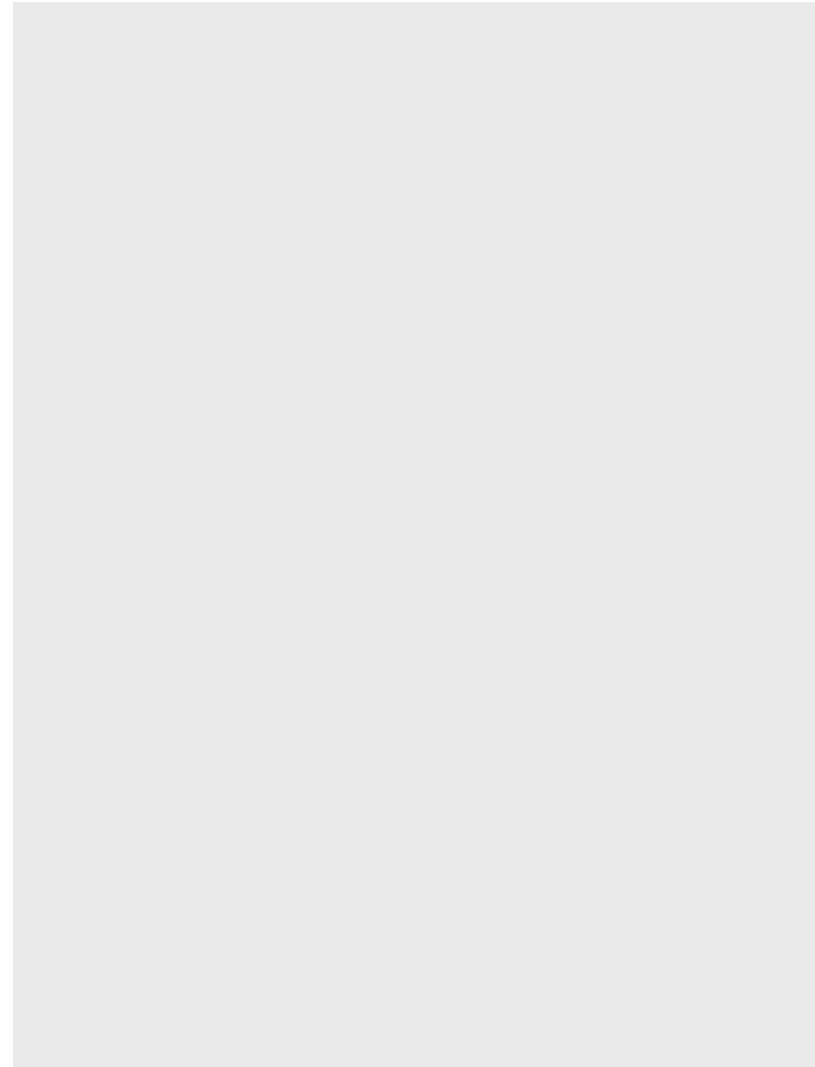
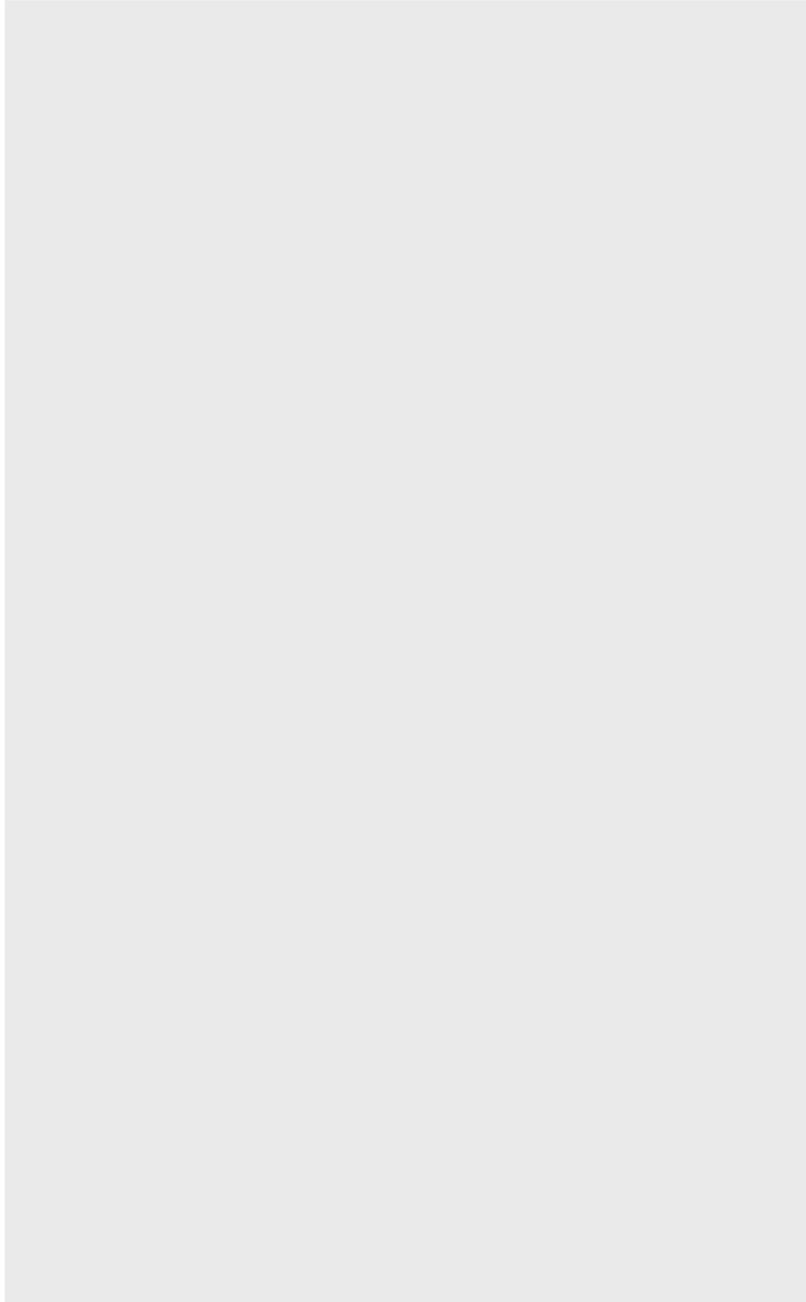
Afterwards I ate a sandwich in St. Stephen's Green and tried to digest the museum. The green was as mild and civilized a place as a park can be, all gracefully massed shrubbery and close-cropped lawns and tranquil waters. This place too had a violent, unimaginable history, most recently as a center for the insurgents in the Easter Rising of 1916, with the troops commanded by Countess Markievicz. She was sentenced to die for her part in the uprising, was pardoned, and became the first woman elected to the English House of Commons, though she was in jail again when she was elected. The poet James Stephens describes how on Easter Monday 1916, he came out from a quiet morning at his desk in the National Gallery to find small groups of people standing about the streets. "These people were regarding steadfastly in the direction of St. Stephen's Green Park, and they spoke occasionally to one another with that detached confidence which proved they were mutually unknown." Finally a man with a red moustache "stared at me as at a person from a different country" and explained: "The Sinn Feiners have seized the city this morning . . . They seized the city at eleven o'clock this morning. The green there is full of them. They have captured the Castle. They have taken the Post Office.'

"My God!" said I, staring at him, and instantly I turned and went running towards the Green.

"In a few seconds I banished astonishment and began to walk. As I drew near the Green rifle fire began like sharply cracking whips. It was from the further side. I saw that the gates

were closed and men were standing inside with guns on their shoulders . . . In the center of this side of the Park a rough barricade of carts and motor cars had been stretched. It was still full of gaps. Behind it was a halted tram, and along the vistas of the Green one saw other trams derelict, untenanted." Easter Monday had been set aside for leisure by everyone but the small army of rebels: Stephens was teaching himself to read music.

While I ate my sandwich of egg and marvelous bread in St. Stephen's, flocks of chickens and the usual ducks of city parks hunted for crumbs along the banks of the pond. People sat in the weak sun or strolled, themselves so mild and civil it was as hard to imagine them kin to the tough fighters of the time as to picture the lush trees and lawns of this park interspersed with barricades and desperados, punctuated by gunfire. I had found something else in the Natural History Museum I had been looking for outside. I'd come to Ireland fascinated and impressed by Roger Casement, who had been instrumental in the Easter Rising and who was hanged for treason a few months later. He was among the most thoughtful of Ireland's heroes, and so complex a character that I was foolish to expect some bronze or marble tribute to him in the streets. Instead I found what seems to be his only monument, in a glass case on the ground floor of the museum, protected from light by a soft imitation-leather cover, so the case had to be opened like a book. In this case, at the beginning of a row of similar covered insect cases, was a huge tropical butterfly all alone, surrounded by poetry on the subject of butterflies. With its deep orange wings bordered in black, a white spot at their upper ends, and a pin through its heart, it hardly looked the worse for age. "A South American butterfly collected for the Natural History Museum by Sir Roger Casement circa 1911," read the inscription on this frail monument.



The Putumayo, where Casement caught the butterfly I came across in the Natural History Museum, was essentially a rerun of the Congo, though the results of his Putumayo report weren't as dramatic. Like the Congo, it was a rubber-tapping region turned into a private slave-labor camp. His 1910 journal of the expedition is an odd mix of subjects jotted down casually.

“September 30th . . . the new method of torture being to hold them under water while they wash the rubber, to terrify them! Also floggings and putting in guns and flogging with machetes across the back . . . then sent for Francisco and will interrogate later tonight. I bathed in the river, delightful, and Andokes came down and caught butterflies for Barnes and I. Then a Capitan embraced us laying his head against our breasts, I never saw so touching a thing, poor soul, he felt we were their friends. Gielgud must be told to stop calling me Casement, it is infernal cheek. Not well. No dinner.” On October 6 he noted splendid Emperor butterflies, and on the next day, “magnificent display of butterflies; beats anything I’ve seen yet.” On October 27 he caught three butterflies on the road, and an expanded diary notes, “. . . to relieve our feelings we began an elaborate butterfly chase there & then on the sandy bank of the river. They were certainly magnificent specimens & the soil was aflame with glowing wings—black & yellow of extraordinary size—the glorious blue & white, and swarms of reddish orange, yellow-ochre, gamboge & sulphur.”

One of his biographers says that the butterfly expeditions were a way to hear evidence out of reach of the overseers. The butterflies, the annoying traveling companions, unavoidable dinners with murderers, his own ailments, his many swims, his admiring looks at nearly nude natives: none of this is part of the official report. Like the other, it is a relentlessly detailed account of the varieties, locales, and inflictors of torture, the political information sifted out of all the range of his interest in the jungle. Like the Congo report, this one portrayed a brutality that was supposed to enforce an economic program of rubber harvesting, but was in fact eliminating its workforce—“I said to this man that under the actual regime I feared the entire Indian population would be gone in ten years, and he answered, ‘I give it six . . .’” Casement considered its horror surpassed anything he had seen in Africa.

Picture the enormous weight of Casement’s responsibility to his government, his conscience, the Putumayan people his

heart went out to all around him, the weight of suffering and death; picture the tropical leaves, the mud and the humid air, a world in which gravity must have pressed down like that of some vast, strange planet, and amidst it all the weightless airy rambles of the butterflies. Theodor Adorno once said that after Auschwitz there could be no poetry; should there be butterflies amidst atrocities? A perennial question for revolutionaries and activists is whether they should themselves enjoy the pleasant fruits they are trying to secure for others. Casement’s answer is affirmative; there should be sapphire and sulphur-colored butterflies to chase and rivers to swim in and journals to keep, for the interminable task of fighting for justice demands its moments of reprieve. When Adorno spoke, his generation imagined the holocaust inflicted upon Jews—and Gypsies, homosexuals, and dissidents, among others—as unique, having already forgotten. Cromwell in Ireland, the Turks in Armenia, and Casement’s reports and not foreseeing the Cambodias, Guatemalas and Rwandas that lay ahead. There were poets *in* Auschwitz, writers like Primo Levi, who could quote Dante inside the camps and who survived to write his own lyric, damning books. Casement’s butterflies seem to propose the complexity, the irreducibility of experience even at such terrible moments. When T. F. Meagher, a leader of Young Ireland’s 1848 revolt, thought of its momentary triumph afterward, in his exile, he found it impossible not to recall as well the hair of the women in the hilltop crowds of supporters, “disordered, drenched, and tangled, streaming in the roaring wind of voices.” Maybe butterflies and atrocities, like victories and streaming hair, are inseparable in memory and experience, however sifted out by reason.

Definitions¹

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shrubby (n.): a planting or growth of shrubs (a low woody plant)

insurgent (n.): a person who revolts against an established government

Sinn Féiner (n.): a person who is part of a movement based on the doctrines of Sinn Féin (a national Irish society founded about 1905)

to seize (v.): to possess or take by force

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derelict (adj.): abandoned, run-down

untenanted (adj.): not leased to or occupied from a tenant (someone who rents or leases a house, apartment, etc., from a landlord)

marvelous (adj.): of the highest quality, causing wonder

flock (n.): a group of animals assembled together

kin (n.): something or someone that is related

to intersperse (v.): to put something at different places among other things

desperado (n.): a violent criminal who is not afraid of getting hurt or being caught

looking the worse for age (idiom): being in a worse condition after doing or experiencing something

frail (adj.): easily broken or destroyed

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rerun (n.): an event that happens again

to jot down (v.): to write briefly or hurriedly

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to flog (v.): to beat or whip someone severely

infernal cheek: probably from *infernally cheeky*

infernally (adj./adv., *old-fashioned*): very bad or unpleasant

cheeky (adj.): rude and showing a lack of respect often in a way that seems playful or amusing

magnificent (adj.): very beautiful or impressive

to expand (v.): to increase in size, range, or amount

elaborate (adj.): made or done with great care or with much detail

specimen (n.): something (such as an animal or plant) collected as an example of a particular kind of thing

gamboge (n.): an orange to brown gum resin from southeast Asian trees

sulphur (n.): a yellow chemical element that has a strong, unpleasant odor

unavoidable (adj.): not able to be prevented or avoided

ailment (n.): a sickness or illness

relentlessly (adv.): continuing without becoming weaker or less severe

inflicter (n.): a person who causes others to experience something unpleasant

to sift (v.): to go through something very carefully in order to find something useful or valuable

to harvest (v.): to gather a crop (a plant that is grown by farmers)

to surpass (v.): to be better or greater than someone or something

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perennial (adj.): existing or continuing in the same way for a long time

affirmative (adj.): saying or showing that the answer is “yes” rather than “no”

interminable (adj.): having or seeming to have no end, continuing for a very long time

reprieve (n.): a period of relief from pain or trouble

dissident (n.): someone who strongly and publicly disagrees with and criticizes the government

to damn (v.): to say or think bad things about someone or something, to strongly criticize someone or something

irreducibility (n.): the quality of something not able to be made smaller or simpler

to recall (n.): to remember something from the past

to drench (v.): to make someone or something completely wet

¹ All definitions have been taken and/or adapted from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (Merriam-Webster, 2021, www.merriam-webster.com) or the Merriam-Webster Learner's Dictionary (Merriam-Webster, 2021, www.learnersdictionary.com).