

# JOSEPH CONRAD: A COMMEMORATION

*Also by Norman Sherry*

**Conrad's Eastern World**

**Conrad's Western World**

**Conrad and His World**

**Conrad: The Critical Heritage**

**Charlotte and Emily Brontë**

**Jane Austen**

# JOSEPH CONRAD

A Commemoration

*Papers from the 1974 International Conference on Conrad*

Edited by

NORMAN SHERRY

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1976 978-0-333-19109-5

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*First edition 1976*

*Reprinted 1979*

*Published by*

THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD

*London and Basingstoke*

*Associated companies in Delhi Dublin Hong Kong*

*Johannesburg Lagos Melbourne New York*

*Singapore Tokyo*

ISBN 978-1-349-02781-1

ISBN 978-1-349-02779-8 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-02779-8

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TO JOSEPH CONRAD'S SONS,  
BORYS AND JOHN

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Action in its essence, the creative art of a writer of fiction may be compared to rescue work carried out in darkness against cross gusts of wind swaying the action of a great multitude. It is rescue work, this snatching of vanishing phases of turbulence, disguised in fair words, out of the native obscurity into a light where the struggling forms may be seen, seized upon, endowed with the only possible form of permanence in this world of relative values – the permanence of memory. And the multitude feels it obscurely too; since the demand of the individual to the artist is, in effect, the cry 'Take me out of myself!' meaning really, out of my perishable activity into the light of imperishable consciousness.

Joseph Conrad: 'Henry James, An Appreciation' (1905);  
reprinted in *Notes on Life and Letters* (1921).

International Conference on Conrad, 1974, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Joseph Conrad's death

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ADAM GILLON is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the State University of New York at New Paltz and President of the Joseph Conrad Society of America. His books include *The Eternal Solitary: A Study of Joseph Conrad* and *Joseph Conrad: Commemorative Essays*. He received the 1967 Alfred Jurzykowski Foundation Award for his translation of Polish literature.

# Editor's Introduction

Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski was born in Russian-occupied Poland in December 1857. He died in England in August 1924. During his lifetime he had been, at the age of five, a political exile with his patriot father, an orphan at the age of eleven, an exile from his country at sixteen, an emigrant to England speaking only a few words of English at twenty, an ordinary seaman in the days of sail, a master in the British mercantile marine, a traveller to the Far East, Africa and South America, a naturalised Englishman and a renowned novelist in English. Poland's loss was, in a sense, Britain's gain. Joseph Conrad chose England as his country and English as his medium, and England was in the process to acquire one of her greatest novelists, one whose experience was international and ranged from the society of the Polish aristocracy to that of seamen before the mast, whose life spanned the last years of the nineteenth century and the earliest years of this century, who knew Carlist gun-running in the Mediterranean, the quiet existence of British villages, the lost lives of traders in the jungles of Borneo and the literary life of London as well as the life of its docks.

The magic of Conrad's work is attested by two diverse persons. W. H. Chesson, at one time reader for T. Fisher Unwin, recalled how, in reading Conrad's first novel (1895), 'its note of haunted loneliness called [him] into isolation' from 'the clamorous heart of London'. And W. N. P. Barbellion, shortly to die at the age of twenty-eight, recorded in his *Diary of Disappointed Man*, in November 1917: 'It is a great relief to be down in the country. Zeppelins terrify me. Have just had a delightful experience in reading Conrad's new book, *Victory* – a welcome relief from all the tension of the past two months.' Though at the other end of the scale, Virginia Woolf wrote: 'I would not like to find *The Rescue* signed Virginia Woolf.' She suspected that the fault lay in Conrad's never seeing anyone 'who knows good writing from bad, and then being a foreigner, talking broken English, married to a lump of a wife, he withdraws more and more into what he once did well, only piles it on higher and higher, until what can one call it but stiff melodrama' (entry for 23 June 1920, *A Writer's Diary*, The Hogarth Press, 1972, p. 27).

Conrad's literary reputation was hard-won, and suffered a decline after his death. There is no denying that it has since formed the material for a critical industry, but this in itself signifies the esteem in which his work is now held. An international conference to commemorate the fiftieth year of his death needed, even in the age of literary conferences, no apology.

The proposal for such a conference was put at the International Conference on Conrad held in London in 1971, and the idea was developed at the International Colloquy on Conrad in Poland in 1972. The obvious site for such a conference was Canterbury. Conrad was, after all, buried in the cemetery of St Thomas's Roman Catholic Church in Canterbury. And, since his death, the University of Kent has been established at Canterbury and was willing to provide hospitality. The subsidence of a building on the campus the day before delegates assembled on 15 July 1974, which cut off heating at Rutherford College, would have satisfied the novelist's ironic sense of fate.

The organising committee's aims were to make the conference truly international and truly representative of the range of Conrad's genius as well as to provide some fresh insight into his life and work. In all, one hundred delegates attended, thirteen countries were represented and literary, critical, historical, biographical, source and textual studies were dealt with in the papers and seminars. A television film of *Almayer's Folly* came from Italy, and a tour of Conrad's homes in the area was organised by Conrad's elder son, Borys, who produced a pamphlet on the houses. Mr Borys Conrad and Mr John Conrad answered questions about their father at an informal session, an exhibition of Conradiana, including photographs, manuscripts and texts, was set up in the University Library and an exhibition of books on Conrad in the University Bookshop. The Arts Council of Great Britain provided financial assistance and the British Council funded Polish delegates.

The essays in this volume show the range of Conrad studies represented at the conference, though it cannot give any indication of the content and quality of the discussions which the papers inspired.

It is appropriate that Albert J. Guerard's essay should come first, since in dealing with this expatriate writer he is attempting to define the distinctive voice of an author who claimed 'a subtle and unforeseen accord' with the English language, a voice which he apprehends as 'a grave interior one . . . regardless of the narrative point of view and whether or not a fictional personage is speaking or writing'. It is a rhythm and irony which comes through even the words of the American

capitalist Holroyd in *Nostramo*. It is determined by characteristic movements of mind unconsciously aimed at controlling and composing experience.

Language and narration are approached from a different angle in Tony Tanner's article, where, in specific relation to the story 'Falk', narration (telling) is seen as 'a crucial component of living, at least living with "a sense of corporate existence"', and where 'the narrator has to speak the unspeakable, and in so doing . . . encounters the insoluble problematics of utterance.'

Although the sources of Conrad's work have received much attention since J. D. Gordan's seminal study of this author, *Joseph Conrad: The Making of a Novelist* (1940), there is still room for speculation as to the influence on his work of specific writers and of specific literary and philosophical movements. A group of papers here concern themselves with these influences. According to his friend, Ford Madox Ford, Conrad thought of himself as an impressionist, but he wished also to snare the invisible into a shape. Ian Watt takes these two attitudes and with *Heart of Darkness* specifically in mind considers Conrad as impressionist and symbolist. Conrad's renowned metaphor in *Heart of Darkness* likening the meaning of Marlow's episodes not to the kernel of a nut but to an enveloping haze is taken as a representation in miniature of Conrad's combination of symbolistic outer meaning and impressionistic sensory qualities, and Conrad's technique within the story is illuminated by this means. Eloise Knapp Hay traces the development of the term 'impressionism' historically, through painting and literature, and considers Conrad's attitude to it and its influence on his technique as a writer.

Edward W. Said relates Conrad to a specific tradition of ideas through his affinities with Nietzsche. Similarities and affinities between the two are seen as aspects of a common tradition in European literature and thought. Said makes the point that 'Conrad has been systematically treated as everything *except* a novelist with links to a cultural and intellectual past', and concludes that he was sensitively attuned 'to the whole psychological culture of the late nineteenth century'.

Discussion of Conrad's political standpoint, of his concepts of society, inevitably focuses on his political novels, *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* and on his essay 'Autocracy and War' and his attitude to things Russian. It was *Under Western Eyes* which received most attention in this context at the conference.

Zdzisław Najder's comparison of Rousseau and Conrad elucidates

Conrad's concepts of man and society, pointing to Conrad's 'opposition-obsession syndrome' in relation to Rousseau's claim for individual uniqueness and the consequent need for freedom, his theory of the 'general will' and the need for the removal of institutions, a syndrome which is revealed not only in his fictional characters and their predicaments but also in Conrad's attitude to democracy, anarchy and revolution. Edward Crankshaw, in 'Conrad and Russia', argues that 'Conrad was a Pole, but it is too often forgotten that he was also a Russian citizen . . . what he renounced in 1886 was Russian, not Polish, citizenship', and taking due cognisance of the possible effects on the young Conrad of his experiences under Russian rule, Crankshaw concludes that his later writings on the subject of Russia were 'the thoughts and feelings, suddenly unloosed after decades of silence, of a man who had been shaken and shocked by the direct impact of evil.' Thus we have both the personal and the intellectual influences in Conrad's life shedding light upon his political convictions.

Two further papers dealing with *Under Western Eyes* shift the emphasis to Conrad as rhetorician and the reader's response to his rhetoric. Andrzej Busza's approach is from the standpoint of ideology and rhetoric. He sees the novel as 'conceived at one level as a polemic and a warning addressed to Garnett and other Western European enthusiasts of things Russian', and claims that this inevitably affects our response to Conrad's insistence that in the novel his intention was ideological, having 'perfect detachment'. Because of this the novel demands a pluralistic approach which neither oversimplifies 'the political stratum of the novel' nor develops 'highly ingenious interpretations' 'in an effort to cope with the ambiguities and complexities of the text'.

Avrom Fleishman's paper, in a sense, goes on to deal with these ambiguities and complexities in detail, examining the plurality of viewpoints within the novel, seeing it as a self-conscious piece of work – its epigram quoted inaccurately from its own text, its text made up of so many different kinds of writing, its main narrator stating in a fundamentally divisive way: 'Words, as is well known, are the great foes of reality . . . the world is but a place of many words and man appears a mere talking animal not much more wonderful than a parrot.'

One paper which stands apart from the rest, and which places Conrad in closer relationship to our own times is M. C. Bradbrook's 'Narrative Form in Conrad and Lowry', which traces parallels between two writers who were equally seamen and exiles and aspired, each according to his own code, to trace the 'interior journey'.

The joint effort of Kenneth W. Davis, David Leon Higdon and Donald W. Rude, 'Editing Conrad', is a significant contribution, representing as it does one of the latest fields of Conrad studies, the establishing of the text in a definitive way. Basing their article on work done at the Textual Studies Institute of Texas Tech University, they present the difficulties and complexities of determining the intention of a writer as meticulous and revisive as Conrad. This work is already bearing fruit in the projected variorum edition of Conrad's works.

The personal relationships in Conrad's life were often significant for his fiction and three essays here consider two of these relationships. James Brand Pinker was Conrad's literary agent from 1899 to 1922 and was of tremendous importance in the support he gave, not least financially. Frederick R. Karl has been editing the Pinker/Conrad correspondence, and in this paper discusses the personal aspect of this relationship and the light it throws upon the development of certain of Conrad's works.

The influence of the effervescent Ford Madox Ford on Conrad's life and works, which arose from collaboration with Conrad and much conversation about technique and purpose, is examined in two papers. Thomas Moser deals particularly with the other side of this relationship – Conrad's influence upon Ford's work, especially *The Good Soldier*, a specific and not perhaps too happy influence. Ivo Vidan examines Ford's *Joseph Conrad, A Personal Remembrance*, a reappraising not only of Ford's reminiscences but also of the literary techniques evolved and employed by both authors, and he ultimately suggests that Joyce was the twentieth century author who carried on where Conrad left off.

Fittingly, I think, we conclude with three papers dealing with Conrad as a Pole, papers which are varied in their approach and in a way again represent the multiplicity of views on Conrad the man and the novelist. Barbara Kocówna in 'The Problem of Language' points out that Conrad spoke Polish, French and English, learning the latter late in life, and sees the problem of language as one intimately linked with the questions of loyalty, involvement and alienation which, as they form part of Conrad's psyche, are part also of his works. Ugo Mursia contributes a chapter to Conrad biography in his account of his search for Conrad's true birthplace, a search which corrects not only later biographers but also Conrad's uncle, Thaddeus Bobrowski. Finally, reversing the picture set up by the conference, Adam Gillon discusses the writer's reception in his native land over the last sixty

years, revealing those aspects of Conrad that first impressed – ‘a Polish Jack London’ – to the present high level of scholastic interest.

I think it can be said that the conference did sum up the abiding interests of Conrad studies, and that it also presaged their future directions. And I must mention that its success depended a great deal upon workers behind the scenes, the committee members, staff at the University of Kent, and those who chaired meetings and contributed to discussions (not least J. C. Maxwell of Balliol who died recently in a road accident) whose presence stands in the background of this book.

Norman Sherry