

REVIEW

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The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad

Last Essays

Edited by Harold Ray Stevens and J. H. Stape
with the assistance of Mary Burgoyne and Alexandre Fachard
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lv + 480 pp. £70/\$120

IN 1929, the publisher Ernest Benn published a collection entitled *The First and Last of Conrad*, which included *Almayer's Folly*, *An Outcast of the Islands*, *The Arrow of Gold*, and *The Rover*. Appearing five years after Conrad's death it encompassed the scope of the writer's career, from his emergence as an author in 1895 up to his last completed novel in 1923. However, as Conrad's posthumously published final collection of writings, *Last Essays* reveals the real first and last of Conrad can be found both earlier and later than either *Almayer's Folly* or *The Rover*. The first ray of light that illuminates the literary gloom before Conrad's arrival with *Almayer's Folly* (1895), and the dying embers found glowing in his final writings before his death in 1924, lie in the pages of *Last Essays*, now published in its Cambridge Edition.

This edition, with its presentation of an authoritative version of the essay "Legends," left unfinished at Conrad's death, and the inclusion of both the "Congo Diary" and the "Up-River Book" dating from Conrad's formative journey to Africa in 1890, unveils the various subjects occupying the writer in his last years before subsequently bringing the reader by a commodious vicus of recirculation back to the emergence of the Conradian voice in the heart of Africa in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

First published in 1926, *Last Essays* was envisaged by Conrad's *de facto* literary executor, Richard Curle, as a companion-piece to *Notes on Life and*

Letters (1921), which had brought together Conrad's major occasional essays on politics, literature, and the sea. Conrad himself saw the volume into print, thereby making the job of the contemporary editor reasonably straightforward with regard to authorial intention. (The volume, edited by J. H. Stape, appeared in the Cambridge Edition in 2004.) With *Last Essays*, things become vastly more complicated given that there is no comparable Conradian approval, or even knowledge, of the volume's contents and appearance. As the editors explain in the textual essay, Conrad's then agent Eric S. Pinker was "keenly aware of his late client's market value [and] wasted little time in beginning negotiations for this final collection of essays and reminiscences" (189). Consequently, Richard Curle, who also orchestrated the arrangement and publication of Conrad's incomplete last novel *Suspense*, took charge of offering to the public what he surmised to be Conrad's vision of a companion volume to *Notes on Life and Letters* and a work that would evoke the earlier autobiographical *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906).

Naturally, this involved the troubled process of making selections from Conrad's past writings overlooked in the production of *Notes on Life and Letters*, those written after it had appeared, and also, importantly, of publishing material that would justify the appearance of *Last Essays* and add to its rather slim bulk. To ensure this, Curle, as a way of unveiling Conradian rarities, chose the earliest then known extant example of Conrad's writing. This is what has come to be known as "The Congo Diary" – named by Curle, whose title is preserved in this edition.

The relatively slight size of the volume none the less remains apparent in this critical edition, with the original essays and "Congo Diary" taking up a mere 137 of some 500 pages. To redress this imbalance and also to give the complete picture of Conrad's African experience, the editors, Harold Ray Stevens and J. H. Stape, have included the "Up-River Book" as the one major alteration to the textual integrity of the main body of text of Curle's edition of *Last Essays*. While this early Conradian document is faithfully transcribed, the inclusion of the "Up-River Book" brings some attendant frustrations. The editors have had to describe in detail so many of Conrad's accompanying sketches and notes that the reader ultimately yearns for a facsimile edition of the entire document. This is partly in the interests of completism, but also because the sketches offer glimpses, however fleeting, of Conrad's visual imagination and his encounter with a landscape that provided him with one of the central images and

metaphors of his influential early work in *Tales of Unrest* and “Heart of Darkness.” A selection of excellent illustrations whets the appetite only for more.

Additionally, a number of “Uncollected Essays” present forewords and introductory notes that Conrad contributed to different publications towards the end of his life, and a series of useful appendices offer some of Conrad’s previously unpublished notes and drafts for the essays. However, of the main body of the Cambridge *Last Essays*, all the major selections – in texts varyingly secure – have appeared in an earlier form in print, either in contemporary serial and book publications and/or collected in Zdzislaw Najder’s *Congo Diary and Other Uncollected Essays* (1978).

The introduction divides the contents of *Last Essays* into writings on the Congo, the sea, geopolitics, and prefaces and reviews. These essays see Conrad treat many themes that are familiar from his earlier works, with the author ruminating in essay form on subjects that once provided material for his compelling fiction. For instance, in “Geography and Some Explorers,” of which an interesting *Ur*-version entitled “Geography” appears as an appendix, Conrad states that “the discovery of America was the occasion of the greatest outburst of reckless cruelty and greed known to history” (4), while at the same time appreciating that the “discovery of the New World marks the end of the fabulous geography” (5) and the potential wonders of exploration.

Elsewhere, the reflective writer discusses modern ocean travel in an essay of that title, acknowledging it as “a marvel. But a marvellous achievement is not necessarily interesting. It may render life more tame than perhaps it should be” (27). In addition to Conrad’s analysis of the horrors, attractions, and mundanities of unfolding history, precise attention is characteristically given in “Geography and Some Explorers” to the elusiveness of language, with Conrad celebrating the first vague stammering of traditional artistic expression over the precision of modern scientific record: “No doubt a trigonometrical survey may be a romantic undertaking . . . [but] a few suggestive words grappling with things seen will have the advantage over a long array of precise no doubt interesting, and even profitable figures” (3).

Conrad’s respect for the suggestive power of literary language, the emotional precision of its linguistic imprecision, as it were, is employed later to distinguish the artist from the critic in one of two essays on Stephen Crane. Conrad notes that he and Crane were “no critics, I mean temperamentally. Crane was even less of a critic than myself. Criticism is

very much a matter of a vocabulary, very consciously used; with us it was the intonation that mattered” (83). The first of these writings on Crane, the longest piece in *Last Essays*, served as an introduction to Thomas Beer’s biography *Stephen Crane* (1923), a volume in which Conrad would have been happily reminded of an exchange in London between a revolver-brandishing Crane and Harold Frederic where “Frederic turned his guns on *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, and Crane, crashing down the revolver fatally on a dessert plate, yelled, ‘You and I and Kipling couldn’t have written *The Nigger!*’” (1924: 174).

While Conrad may not have regarded himself as a critic, he nevertheless appears in *Last Essays* as an interested – at times intellectually, at times financially – spectator and commentator on the literary, political, and journalistic culture of Britain in the early decades of the twentieth century. If not happy as a critic, it seems more likely that he would have been content to regard himself to a certain degree as an essayist. However, while Conrad’s famous preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* has been frequently anthologized in recent years in surveys of artistic statements and manifestoes, at the time of *Last Essays*’ publication Conrad, while certainly lauded as a master novelist and storyteller, was not especially celebrated as an essay writer. In his introduction to his anthology entitled *Essayists Past and Present* in 1925, J. B. Priestley acknowledged G. K. Chesterton and Conrad’s critical nemesis Robert Lynd as amongst the foremost essayists of the day in the tradition of Montaigne, Bacon, Lamb, and Hazlitt. This tradition, Priestley observed, ensured that:

[The] mark of our attitude towards the essayist is that we are indifferent to his subject. It is he and not his subject that engages us. . . . [T]he real essayist has no subject, or, if you will, has every subject in the world at his command, for the simple reason that his business is to talk about himself or to express the relation between any subject and himself. Thus, he can write, probably delightfully, on a topic about which he is completely ignorant, because he will simply discuss his ignorance. The true essay approximates to familiar talk, and the essayist is the brilliant and self-revealing conversationalist, whose every phrase is salted with personality. (1925: 8-9)

To be sure, *Last Essays* does not offer the same sense of Conrad the expansive essayist found in *Notes on Life and Letters*, but Conrad’s approach to the essay nevertheless adheres to that celebrated most

famously by Anatole France, and reiterated above by Priestley, in its focus on the primary importance of the personality of the essayist and the distinctly secondary significance of familiarity with his subject. France's *La Vie littéraire* (1888–92) saw the writings of the essayist as, in Conrad's later rephrasing, "the adventures of a choice soul amongst masterpieces" (*Notes on Life and Letters*, 36).

Here, in "Outside Literature," an essay on the literary style, or distinct lack thereof, in *Notices to Mariners*, Conrad playfully analyzes the adventures of the choice soul amongst writing that seeks not to "open horizons" or "plumb the depths" (30), but that strives after the more elusive and necessary "ideal of Perfect Accuracy" (33). Conrad's familiarity with *Notices to Mariners* may be taken as a given; but his acquaintance with his other topics ranges from non-existent – in the case of a preface to A. S. Kinkead's *Landscapes of Corsica and Ireland*, the latter of which Conrad never saw – to deeply intimate, notably in the case of reminiscences on his relationship with Crane. Reflecting on their encounters and writings, Conrad returns to the inescapable force of personality: "It seems to me that in trying to recall my memories of Stephen Crane I have been talking so far only about myself" (73).

The origins of Conrad's essays were diverse, emerging, as the editors explain in the Introduction, "by request – a pattern long established – or in response to events reported in the press" (xxxii). Pieces such as "The Unlighted Coast" and "The Dover Patrol" celebrate British naval defence during the Great War; Conrad's personal tribute to the *Torrens* parallels the writer's early sea-life with that of the famous clipper ship; "Memorandum" discusses the "training of Merchant Service officers belonging to the Port of Liverpool;" "The Future of Constantinople" sees Conrad's attention directed to the Balkan problem; and "The Loss of the Dalgona" reprints a letter to the editor of *The London Mercury* in 1921, continuing the writer's longstanding interest in maritime matters.

Conrad's late-career dealings with literature and journalism reveal the author's established position within the contemporary literary firmament and his strong connections to the popular periodical press of his day. However, even though *Last Essays* displays the power of the writer's later reputation and the various publishing opportunities resulting from it, it should be remembered that Conrad had long been an essayist and that his career and literary style were consistently and intimately intertwined with the history of periodical publication in Britain at the turn of the twentieth century. As early as 1898 he contributed "Tales of the Sea" and "An Observer in Malaya" to the *Outlook* and *Academy*, respectively, and

throughout his career he insistently positioned his writing in relation to both a broad sense of literary tradition and his immediate contemporaries through his engagement with publications such as *Blackwood's* and *The English Review*.

What is more, as J. B. Priestley noted in 1925:

To anyone with any knowledge of literary history, there is nothing more amusing than the not infrequent complaints of critics and reviewers, who imagine that they are standing for the dignity of letters, against the practice of collecting contributions to the Press, essays or critical articles, and making books of them. We are always led to infer that this is a new and reprehensible practice, a mark of a degenerate age. The truth is, of course, that practically all the best essays in the language have first seen the light in the periodical press. (1925: 17-18)

Amongst Conrad's explorations of the subject of literature in *Last Essays*, pieces on Galsworthy, W. H. Hudson, Crane, Hugh Walpole, A. J. Dawson, and Curle, which originally constituted prefaces or introductions to books by or about these writers, bear witness to his contemporary literary milieu (while also allowing the reader to dwell on the increasingly obscure position some of these figures occupy today) and, importantly, his significant power as a literary endorser of younger writers in the last years of his life.

Given Richard Curle's prominent role in the publication history of *Last Essays*, Conrad's preface to Curle's *Into the East* (1923), entitled "Travel," is worth examining here. Through seven pages of somewhat evasive writing, Conrad laments, as he does in "Geography and Some Explorers," the passing of a nobler, more adventurous idea of the traveller. This subject had been long dear to Conrad, featuring especially in *Lord Jim*, where tourists and modern travel become the target of Marlow's narratorial ire. Barely mentioning the author of *Into the East*, and not at all by name, "Travel" none too subtly denigrates Curle's modern peripatetic literary offerings by questioning the whole enterprise of contemporary travel, and, more particularly, the writings that result from such peregrinations, often written by "people who go round the world for a change and rest, either suffering from overwork (whatever that may mean) or from neurasthenia" (66). Of course, such a lament has periodically moved upon the waters of modern letters, resounding from Byron's *Don Juan* through to the writings of Paul Fussell; one certainty is that longing for the prelapsarian age of travel has always been with us.

In his account of his travels to Burma and Malaya, Curle's writing adopts a clear Conradian register, evoking especially the language of "Youth" when Curle observes the "pervasive spirit" of the "undivided East, of that East whose embroidered night is the very touchstone of illusion" (1923: 131). Whether owing to reservations about Curle's "Conradian" echoes, or that fact that elsewhere in *Into the East* Curle is "reminded of Dostoievsky, who, externally abnormal, is really sane because he accepts life" (1923: 117), Conrad's attitude to the figure directly involved in initially bringing *Last Essays* to light appears amusingly ambivalent, especially as "this modern traveller . . . is very modern," while "these things which stand as if imperishable in the pages of old books of travel, are all blown away" (68) and barely discernible in contemporary accounts by modern would-be wanderers.

Significantly, the effective erasure of Curle from Conrad's writing in "Travel," whatever its reason, is likewise a policy politely adopted by the editors of the Cambridge *Last Essays*, although one not altogether successfully achieved. Old critics and editors die hard, it seems, and one of the features of this work is the guarded collaboration between Richard Curle, Harold Ray Stevens, and J. H. Stape across the decades that divide the original publication and the appearance of this critical edition. Curle's efforts in bringing the volume to the public in 1926 are naturally acknowledged, and his selections, mostly, adhered to; but Curle is notably no longer given the central role in the shaping narrative of Conrad's *Last Essays*. Whereas the 1926 publication opened, like Conrad's posthumously published *Suspense*, with an introduction by Curle, here Curle's original introductory remarks languish deep within *Last Essays*' pages in an Appendix, in reduced type, lying as a shrunken foundation entombed, perhaps justly, beneath the impressive labyrinthine structure of modern textual scholarship.

Throughout, *Last Essays* displays the rigours of the editors' art, with a detailed introduction, informative textual essay, illustrations, explanatory notes, maps, and an apparatus to rival those so far produced in the Cambridge Edition. Given the swift appearance of *Last Essays* following Conrad's death, hasty decisions were initially made in establishing the coherence of the texts that make up the volume, with the editorial stringency we associate with the Cambridge Edition not featuring in either Curle's *Last Essays* or Najder's later *Congo Diary and Other Uncollected Essays*. Here, however, all known preprint documents and all previously published versions have been compared for the first time, thereby

establishing this critical edition as the only authoritative repository of these diverse pieces.

To accompany the new textual reliability of the essays, the editors have generously supplied over seventy pages of explanatory notes that give a wealth of contextual information about the breadth of Conrad's references in the essays. While some of these notes might appear to be nervously exhaustive (one, for example, assures us that a given phrase in Conrad's writing is a "commonplace," but then proceeds to list well-known incidences of use of a similar phrase by other writers and in popular culture, just in case), more accurately they are a testament to the scholarly industry, energy, and imaginative research of Harold Ray Stevens and J. H. Stape. From biographical clarifications, allusions to popular literature, Shakespeare, Herodotus, contemporary periodical illustrations, geographical matters, and Conrad's linguistic idiosyncrasies, the explanatory notes offer immeasurably rich contextual information that guides readers through a fascinating open sea of historical and literary reference, returning them fortified to the text and also encouraging them to sail onwards in their own research.

Given that *Last Essays* is not one of the "glamour" volumes in Conrad's canon, and to carry the Melvillian note above just a little further, we might return to *Moby-Dick*'s sympathetic address to scholars, archivists, and librarians to sympathize with the editors by saying "For by how much more pains ye take to please the world, by so much the more shall ye for ever go thankless!" But when future Conradians come to explore *Last Essays* and its contexts, they will find an edition waiting that acts as a peerless guide to their scholarly labours. So, between the daunting work involved in presenting the edition and the fitting reward that awaits when the measure of critical editions is taken by the seven-storied editorial heavens, those who are familiar with the rigours of painstaking research may say to the editors: "Here ye strike but splintered hearts together – there, ye shall strike unsplinterable glasses!"

While the first and last of Conrad are on display for the reader in the variety of material published in *Last Essays*, fortunately this will not be the last of the Cambridge Conrad, with some of the author's most important works scheduled to appear in the coming years.

Works cited

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The Conradian