

**By Keith Carabine, *University of Kent Emeritus Research Fellow***

Maya Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World*. William Collins, 2017. 358pp. £25

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Maya Jasanoff is a distinguished historian whose *Edge of Empire* (2005) won the 50th Duff Cooper Prize, offering, as the back cover attests, “an exhilarating cocktail of history and travelogue.” Similarly, the blurb on the front inside page of *The Dawn Watch* only slightly exaggerates when it announces that “This spellbinding narrative casts new light on his [Conrad’s] age and offers fresh insight to our own;” for *The Dawn Watch* is indeed a dazzling blend of travelogue, history, biography and literary criticism.

In her lively Prologue, Jasanoff declares that she “wanted to see whatever I could of what Conrad had seen – because what Conrad had seen shapes what so many other people have seen since.” Her reading of Conrad over many years provoked her amazement at the prophetic sweep of his “particular way of looking at the world.” As she followed in Conrad’s footsteps she sought answers to Naipaul’s compelling questions: “How had Conrad ... Been everywhere before me? How had he managed to “meditate on my world, a world I recognise today”? The answer dawned on Jasanoff halfway across the Indian ocean, the sole woman on the “*Christophe Colomb*, a French cargo ship that does an eleven-week circuit between China and northern Europe, carrying up to 13,344 twenty-foot containers on board”: “From the deck of a ship, Conrad watched the emergence of the globally interrelated world that I was sailing across today,” and, she maintains: “there’s no better emblem of globalization today than the container ship ... Ninety percent of the world’s trade travels by sea, which makes ships and sailors more central to the world economy than ever before.”

Jasanoff discovers in Conrad’s life and fiction “a history of globalisation seen from the inside out,” and, inspired by “Conrad’s most insightful ... critics, Edward Said and Ian Watt,” she happily uses “the key” of biography to interpret Conrad’s work. To investigate Conrad’s “life in the wide world”, however, she turns to Marx’s observation that “man makes his own history, but ... he does not make it out of conditions chosen by himself.” She, therefore, approaches Conrad as “an object of history,” because it “has let me shape a biography from the outside in, distinguishing the choices he made from the ones that circumstance made for him.” Thus, Jasanoff tells “his life story to link the histories of Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America and the oceans in between; and to consider what Conrad said about them in four of his best-known novels: *The Secret Agent*, *Lord Jim*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *Nostramo*.” Correspondingly, she divides *The Dawn Watch* into four parts, “Nation”, “Ocean”, “Civilization”, and “Empire,” that brilliantly weave together history, biography, travelogue and literary commentary.

Chapter 4, “Following the Sea,” opens with a vivid reconstruction, full of marvellous details, of an ordinary day in the life of “Ordinary Seaman Konrad Korzeniowski ... on board the *Duke of Sutherland*, six weeks out from London, four days over the Line, seven bells into the morning watch.” Then “The “little one bell” marked midnight: second night watch. ... “Another day done: December 3, 1878, his twenty-first birthday.” A delightful surprise for the reader, but the day may have been an uneasy experience for a foreigner struggling with the language who “didn’t mix well with this crew.” Jasanoff is such a fine story teller that only the footnotes remind us that her narrative of Conrad’s sea career is seamlessly woven out of a huge range of sources, including contemporary accounts of a sailor’s life, histories of British shipping, Parliamentary and Official

Documents, Royal Commissions, shipping records, and, of course, modern scholarship and biographies of Conrad, and from Conrad's correspondence, essays, fiction and autobiographies.

Elsewhere, Jasanoff recounts how *Heart of Darkness* became "a touchstone for thinking about Africa and Europe, civilization and savagery, imperialism, genocide" and then a "flashpoint" when Chinua Achebe declared it a "deplorable book" rife with degrading stereotypes of Africa and Africans," labelling Conrad "a bloody racist." Chapters Eight ("The Dark Places") and Nine ("White Savages") reveal both Jasanoff's ambivalent relationship to Achebe and her own failure to engage with the complexities of Conrad's humane masterpiece.

On the one hand, Jasanoff accepts that Conrad employs racist stereotypes, asserting that Conrad never considered the possibility "that Africans might have a consciousness, let alone a history, society or faith." The latter view, however, skewers much of her commentary on *Heart of Darkness*, including such breezy statements as "for company he [Marlow] had only vulgar white passengers, and African crew whom he scarcely recognized as fellow humans." "Vulgar!!?" The passengers, in fact, are excoriated as genocidal racists, including the "bloodthirsty little gingery beggar" who "positively danced" over the crew's "glorious slaughter of them [the Africans] in the bush" (97). Similarly, Jasanoff trivialises Marlow when, faced with the "naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eyes" of the Africans on the bank, he merely "pulled the steam whistle and sped away." Jasanoff is a superb writer and a fine historian and biographer, but she is not and would not claim to be a literary critic and, therefore, misled by her prejudices, she fails to notice that a distraught Marlow hopes that "the screech after screech" of the whistle will prompt the Africans to flee and avert their massacre by "The pilgrims [who]... with their Winchesters ... were simply squirting lead into that bush" (90).

In Chapter 9, "White Savages," Jasanoff acknowledges that Marlow recognises the Africans' "humanity" and admires their "sense of restraint, a sense of ethics ... the very thing that 'civilization' was supposed to imbue": she fails, however, to see that, therefore, the Africans **must** have a developed consciousness. Again, as a good biographer, Jasanoff is unavoidably aware that Conrad's "recognition of humanity across a line of savagery" began with his early encounter with Russia that "had the effect of binding his racist language to a potentially radical suggestion. What made the difference between savagery and civilisation ... transcended skin color" and "place." The issue for Conrad wasn't that "savages" were inhuman. It was that any human could be a "savage" (and, therefore, could be a racist?).

Jasanoff ends her examination of *Heart of Darkness* with the assertion that "By nesting Marlow's experience in Africa inside the telling of his story in England, Conrad warned his readers that what had happened there and what happened here were fundamentally connected. Everywhere could go dark." Such "radical" suggestions, however, lack resonance because Achebe is signally absent from this chapter, suggesting that Jasanoff is reluctant to criticise him or unaware of the implications of her "radical" reading. After all, they contradict Achebe's damnation of Conrad as "a thoroughgoing racist" and expose the hollowness of his condescending case that "Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron teeth," alongside the nonsense of such claims as Conrad "chose the role of purveyor of comforting myths." *The Dawn Watch* may (deservedly) prove to be the first popular and best-selling book on Conrad ever written. My fear is that Jasanoff's failure to appreciate the subtleties of Conrad's most misunderstood masterpiece and her final avoidance of Achebe, may ensure that another generation of readers will accept the degrading slur that Conrad, a many-sided, complex, humane writer, is a "bloody racist."

Jasanoff's final recognitions turn out to be humane Conradian truths that help explain many readers' admiration for his fiction and that Achebe did not recognize. Conrad was aware that we all struggle and often fail to understand ourselves and our actions, that we are all prone to self-deception, and are unable to read the thoughts of others because the very "gifts" that distinguish us from the beasts, of "expression" and consciousness, are inherently duplicitous and may well flow "from the heart of an impenetrable darkness" (92). From this perspective, one that Jasanoff half-recognises, the darkest, most impenetrable heart of all is not located in darkest Africa, but in the human heart itself. Finally, Conrad's awareness may explain why he does not *presume* to enter the minds of individual Africans, preferring instead to make us see and feel their "utter despair" (91). As Conrad shows throughout, what the whites invoke as law, "Transgression – punishment – bang!" (68), Africans experience as madness: "an insoluble mystery from over the sea" (57), "an invasion, an infliction, a visitation" (73).

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