

In Memoriam: Jacques Alexandre Berthoud (1935–2011)



It is with deepest regret that we record the death of Professor Jacques Berthoud on 29 October 2011 at the age of seventy-six. The community of Conrad scholars is much diminished by the loss of our cherished friend, colleague, mentor and exemplar. More generally, the wider family of international scholars has lost one of its most distinguished sons, one rightly described by Zdzislaw Najder in 2003 as “the best living critic of Conrad”.

Jacques’ life, as with Conrad’s, was marked by some dramatic transplantings; also like Conrad, he was a cosmopolitan, at home in different cultures and with different languages. In 1938, at the age of three, he left his native Switzerland with his family for Lesotho (formerly Basutoland) where his father, a missionary, served at remote country stations. His varied education at boarding-schools in southern Africa led to a degree-course at the University of Witwatersrand, from where he graduated in 1956. In the following year, he met Astrid Titlestad, with their marriage taking place in 1958. In 1960, Jacques secured his first permanent academic post as a lecturer in English at the University of Natal, Pietmaritzberg.

His “English” period began in 1967, when the Berthouds, finding life under South African apartheid to be increasingly insupportable, responded very readily to a proposal by F. T. Prince, then Head of English at Southampton University, that Jacques should become a member of staff there. He duly accepted a lectureship at Southampton, where he remained until 1979.

At the time in the late 1970s when older members of the Conrad community were first coming to know Jacques, he was on the point of accepting a chair at the University of York, where he worked for the rest of his career. There he served a prodigious seventeen years as head of the Department of English and Related Literatures, also acting as Deputy Vice-Chancellor for three of these years. On his retirement in 2002, he was made Professor Emeritus. His

contribution to the university's life – as inspiring teacher, graduate supervisor, scholar and hard-working administrator – was truly outstanding, as the many obituaries by his York colleagues have repeatedly testified. One of them has written, “His unique blend of intellectual vivacity, trenchant and philosophic acuteness stamped all his writing, teaching and talk, and rendered him a legendary presence at the three universities fortunate enough to employ him.”

Jacques' move to York also roughly coincided with a shift in his interest away from Shakespeare and D. H. Lawrence to Joseph Conrad, the first fruits of which were *Conrad: The Major Phase* (1978), a monograph designed for advanced students. Here, one felt that Conrad the novelist, a maker of fine distinctions and difficult paradoxes, had found his ideal expositor, one who worked with exceptional clarity of style and purpose. Jacques' generous and respectful study, with its sustained critical finesse, develops the view that Conrad was “in full possession of what he was trying to do and say” and emphasizes the moral and intellectual power of the writer's major phase. In his commitment to the “humanly intelligible”, Jacques initially identifies the practical moral bearings common to Conrad's life as a seaman and artist – solidarity, restraint and fidelity. If these values give Conrad's work an underlying affirmative impulse, they are also – he argues – at the basis of the fiction's most severe strains and contradictions, all of which emerge with the force of a strikingly “modern anguish”. Such anguish generates, however, its countervailing energy and in turn the difficult tragic paradox that “man seems capable of discovering the reality of his own values only through their defeat or contradiction”. Offering an alternative to the fashionable view of Conrad as sceptical nihilist, Jacques' monograph has proved to be the most permanently valuable study that we have of Conrad the *tragic* novelist: it is a standard volume on all of our bookshelves, and it is still required reading for advanced students.

Jacques' later essays on Conrad – introductions to editions, published conference papers, meditations on critical method and so on – are also the work of a formidably subtle intelligence. Each essay proves to be the opportunity for a fresh intellectual engagement (Jacques never repeated himself) and turns upon a large idea. Such themes as war and autobiography, Conrad and anxiety, convergent cultures in his fiction, Conrad and realism provided him with starting-points for richly incremental meditations, which left one feeling that a short Berthoud essay was as full of possibilities as any lengthy monograph (as, by analogy, a Conrad short story can often seem to have the scope of a full-length novel). Also required reading, these essays now await an academic publisher to collect them in a single volume for a new generation of scholars and students.

Jacques would rehearse many of his ideas in sessions at Joseph Conrad Society conferences, where a Berthoud paper, with its mixture of gravity and wit, was always a special and especially well-attended “occasion”. Later, in 2005, the Joseph Conrad Society committee was unanimous in nominating him to be the first distinguished speaker to deliver the bi-annual Philip Conrad Memorial Lecture in Amsterdam. One of my own most abiding memories of Jacques as a public speaker derives, however, from one of his other favourite roles – as chairman of the British section of Amnesty International. On this occasion (in Hull), he walked into a crowded auditorium with no notes, only carrying a selection of books under his arm. This was to be no conventional oration or address on specific prisoners of conscience. Instead, he invited the audience to share a meditation on the meaning and practice of conscience itself, drawing upon a wide range of examples from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure* to works by Henry James and Conrad. The occasion brought home Jacques’ belief that great literature can show us what it is to be fully human and, conversely, illustrate how fine consciences can be despoiled and brutalized. Its conclusion was shaped, movingly, in order to underline how the moral and philosophic basis of the Amnesty International organization is, in the simplest terms, an extension of our sympathetic humanity.

Despite the illness of his last years, Jacques retained a wonderful resilience of spirit: his undiminished graciousness, generosity, intellectual energy and impish wit will long live with those who were lucky enough to know him. He is survived by his wife Astrid, his daughters Mireille and Josephine, his son Tristan and four grandchildren.

A Checklist of Books, Editions and Articles on Conrad by Jacques Berthoud

Joseph Conrad: The Major Phase (C.U.P., 1978). Translated into French by Michel Desforges, *Joseph Conrad. Au Cœur de l’Œuvre* (Paris: Criterion, 1992).

Joseph Conrad, Lord Jim: A Tale, World’s Classics, ed. with introduction and notes (O.U.P., 1983).

Joseph Conrad, The Nigger of the “Narcissus”, World’s Classics, ed. with introduction and notes (O.U.P., 1984).

“Narrative and Ideology: A Critique of Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious*” [on *Lord Jim*], in *Narrative: From Malory to Motion Pictures*, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies, second series, ed. Jeremy Hawthorn (London: Arnold, 1985), pp. 101–15.

Joseph Conrad, The Shadow-Line, A Confession, Penguin Classics, ed. with introduction and notes (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986).

Joseph Conrad, Almayer's Folly: A Story of an Eastern River, World's Classics, ed. with introduction and notes (O.U.P., 1992).

"The Modernization of Sulaco", in *Conrad's Cities: Essays for Hans van Marle*, ed. Gene M. Moore (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992), pp. 139–58.

"Anxiety in *Under Western Eyes*", *The Conradian*, 18:1 (1993), 1–14.

"*The Secret Agent*", in *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*, ed. J. H. Stape (C.U.P., 1996), pp. 100–21.

"Convergent Cultures in Early Modernist Novellas" [on "A Smile of Fortune"], in *Inter-Relations: Conrad, James, Ford and Others*, ed. Keith Carabine and Max Saunders (2003), pp. 281–92.

Joseph Conrad, Nostromo, World's Classics, ed. with Mara Kalnins (O.U.P., 2007).

Joseph Conrad, Twixt Land and Sea: Tales, Cambridge Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad, ed. with Laura L. Davis and S. W. Reid (C.U.P., 2008).

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