

# Conrad in My Life

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It is a privilege and an honour to close the 40th Anniversary Conference of the Joseph Conrad Society (UK), especially as the first was also at Kent in 1974. It was run by Professor Molly Mahood who was 95 last month. Molly is sorry that she could not attend the Conference and sends her best wishes to you all. I arrived at Kent in 1967, but I could not attend the Conference because in the summer of 1974 I was in America awaiting my marriage to Virginia Taft, and we will celebrate 40 years together in ten weeks time.

I think I am right in saying that only two people in the audience today, John Crompton and Laurence Davies, were present in 1974. John is probably best known to either younger or overseas Conradians as the wise and humane dispenser of travel grants drawn from the legacy bequeathed to our little society by 'Mac' and Juliet MacLauchlan. Juliet was the first Chair-person of the JCS and I took over in 1995, following the 21st International Conference of the JCS in conjunction with the Henry James Society of America, which I had organised at Kent. (A photograph of the participants in 1995 can be found on the JCS web-site.) Laurence is the President of our Society and is the main editor of all nine volumes of *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad* (1983–2007), one of the great achievements in modern letters.

Ever since I was asked to close the Conference I have dithered over how I would handle such an important and potentially pretentious subject as 'Conrad in my Life'. A few days ago I thought I would talk about the joys of teaching Conrad in a variety of contexts (alongside Dostoevsky, or James or Woolf, or in a course on 'The Political Novel'), but I decided that this would be overly pedagogic and dull. Again, some two weeks ago, I wrote a short history of my involvement in Conrad and with Conradians and in how much fun I had compiling the four fat volumes of *Joseph Conrad: Critical Assessments* (Helm Information, 1992); fun, because I was genuinely surprised even as a 50-year-old at the sheer scale and variety of approaches to Conrad's *oeuvre* and to Conrad the man. (One reason, of course, why we are lucky to be Conradians.) Two days ago, I decided that such an approach could easily bore an audience of Conradians for two reasons: many of you have made far greater contributions to Conrad studies than I have, and beginning Conradians would be unable to connect to my undying regard for either past Conradians such as Jacques Berthoud, Adam Gillon, Eloise Knapp Hay and others, or to my praise of living Conradians and dear friends, several of whom are present in this room, including Owen [Knowles], Laurence [Davies], Hugh [Epstein], Allan [Simmons] and Robert [Hampson], who have greatly enriched my life over the past 40 years.

So, a few days ago, I impulsively decided to 'get deep down and personal', as the saying goes, and talk about how I first stumbled upon Conrad as an undergraduate at Leeds in the spring of 1961 and what he meant to me then. 'Stumbled' is exactly right because when I first arrived at Leeds in the autumn of 1959 I was a theology student. More than half-way through my first term I was leaving a seminar on Hinduism and shared my enthusiasm for polytheistic religions with an earnest older chap who hoped to become a Methodist minister, and he replied: 'It's all right Keith, but it's not t't true faith, is it?' I found myself saying, 'Ray, you've done me a huge favour'. 'av I upset you?' 'No Ray, but you've crystallised something for me. I'm getting out.' I went straight over to

the English Department Office and asked to speak to the Chair, Professor Norman Jeffares who had told his secretary that he did not want to be disturbed. I pleaded with her to allow me to knock on his door, and understandably Jeffares was deeply irritated to meet an importunate young man pleading with him to help me to change my life. Fortunately he was a genial Irishman who laughed heartily when I told him about Ray, and he said I could start an English degree the following year. 'No,' I replied, 'I have to start it now'; and when he protested that I had missed too many classes, especially in Old English which was compulsory, I assured him that I could catch up with the latter over Christmas and that I had already done much of the reading for the Introductory course on Modern Literature because I was lodging with students studying English. 'What books have you read?' he asked, and I replied, 'I've read a lot of YEETS'. 'Have you really?' he asked, and then we talked about our shared fondness for YEETS for some 20 minutes and he allowed me to join the English Department forthwith. Later that day, I told my fellow lodgers that I was now an English student and learned that the correct pronunciation of Yeats was 'YATES' and that Jeffares was the world's foremost authority on him and that the volume of Yeats I had been reading was in fact edited by him! (Incidentally, I instantly recognised that Jeffares had manifested an extraordinary grace in not correcting an ignorant youngster).

Because the intellectual climate in the Leeds English Dept was a mixture of Leavis and Marxism you will not be surprised to learn that I began with Conrad's great political novels *The Secret Agent* and *Nostramo*, together with *Lord Jim*. As a 20-year-old, my admiration for Conrad was sparked by the drollery and black comedy arising out of the multiple cross-purposes of the characters and by Conrad's astonishing switches of voice, point of view and chronology. I was dimly aware that Conrad demanded an active reader who was willing to construct the chronology of events in *Nostramo* for himself and to negotiate the puzzling, opposing viewpoints on, and interpretations of, a given event such as Jim's jump or of a totemistic commodity such as the silver in *Nostramo*. And I remember struggling feebly with the notion that the sub-title of *The Secret Agent* was 'A Simple Tale'. But, and this is my subject, I am sure that my love of Conrad was sealed by the tears I shed on first reading *The Secret Agent*, *Lord Jim*, and *Nostramo*.

For your delectation, my hand-out contains the three passages that prompted my tears. Let us turn to the first, taken from the closing pages of the penultimate chapter (XII) of *The Secret Agent* when Winnie Verloc rushes out of the shop after stabbing her husband and, terrified of the gallows and bent on suicide, falls into the astonished arms of the philanderer, Ossipon, who is loitering and hoping to 'fasten himself' upon Winnie 'for all she's worth' because he mistakenly thinks that it was Verloc who had been blown to pieces by the bomb and not Stevie, Winnie's simple-minded brother. Like most first time readers, I was amused and appalled by the black comedy generated by the characters' misreading of each other and by the narrator's mischievous description of Ossipon's amazement at his swift success with Winnie and his consternation when she tells him that she has spoken to the police; and then his sheer funk and panic after he stumbles upon 'Mr. Verloc in the fullness of his domestic ease reposing on a sofa' with a knife stuck in his chest! From this moment on, Winnie for Ossipon, the disciple of Lombroso the criminologist-anthropologist who even to a 20-year-old was a patent fool, is like her brother Stevie 'a degenerate' but 'of a murdering type.' Hence he fears for his life and cannot wait to abandon her on the train. Ossipon's strangled Lombrosian reflections lead into the sequence that prompted my tears:

'He was an extraordinary lad, that brother of yours. Most interesting to study. A perfect type in a way. Perfect!'

He spoke scientifically in his secret fear. And Mrs Verloc, hearing these words of commendation vouchsafed to her beloved dead, swayed forward with a flicker of light in her sombre eyes, like a ray of sunshine heralding a tempest of rain.

‘He was that indeed,’ she whispered softly, with quivering lips. ‘You took a lot of notice of him, Tom. I loved you for it.’

‘It’s almost incredible the resemblance there was between you two,’ pursued Ossipon, giving a voice to his abiding dread, and trying to conceal his nervous sickening impatience for the train to start. ‘Yes; he resembled you.’

These words were not especially touching or sympathetic. But the fact of that resemblance insisted upon was enough in itself to act upon her emotions powerfully. With a little faint cry, and throwing her arms out, Mrs Verloc burst into tears at last.

Ossipon entered the carriage, hastily closed the door and looked out to see the time by the station clock. Eight minutes more. For the first three of these Mrs Verloc wept violently ... She tried to talk to her saviour, to the man who was the messenger of life.

‘Oh, Tom! How could I fear to die after he was taken away from me so cruelly! How could I! How could I be such a coward!’

She lamented aloud her love of life, that life without grace or charm, and almost without decency, but of an exalted faithfulness of purpose, even unto murder. And, as so often happens in the lament of poor humanity, rich in suffering but indigent in words, the truth – the very cry of truth – was found in a worn and artificial shape picked up somewhere among the phrases of sham sentiment.

‘How could I be so afraid of death! Tom, I tried. But I am afraid. I tried to do away with myself. And I couldn’t. Am I hard? I suppose the cup of horrors was not full enough for such as me.’

The whole sequence is desperately sad as we watch Winnie clutch at straws, inventing a past relationship with the appalling Ossipon whom she now regards as her ‘Saviour’. I began to cry over the narrator’s compassionate, prayerful testimony to Mrs. Verloc’s ‘exalted faithfulness of purpose, even unto murder’, but the floodgates opened when I read ‘As so often happens in the lament of poor humanity rich in suffering and indigent in words.’ My tears manifested an uncomplicated response because I felt at that moment and still feel today that Conrad’s beautiful formulation spoke for my mother and grandmother and women like them who were indeed ‘rich in suffering’ when, following the Second World War, they struggled for decency and against poverty, sometimes alone because their husbands had been killed, and sometimes with hapless, damaged men, in damp, small, terraced houses in a smog-laden dirty slum in central Manchester. Women like my mother and maternal grandmother gritted their teeth and demonstrated a ‘faithfulness of purpose’ as they devoted their lives to their children’s welfare and future, as Winnie and her mother had for poor Stevie. When I was eight my mother married a sweet, intelligent, damaged Irish navy who after a few drinks topped by brandy was transformed into a nasty and abusive drunkard; and, of course, we were all in his firing line and I was aware that my mother’s love for me was something that he couldn’t handle. My mother’s ‘indigence in words’ accompanied her fearful sense ‘that things are not worth looking into’ and that personal feelings must be repressed: otherwise all hope of maintaining family decencies would be shattered – as, of course, they often were. Winnie’s unconditional love for Stevie took place behind her husband’s back and proved, cruelly, to be of no avail; without the unconditional, protective love of my mother and grandmother, I would not be standing here today.

In 1961, I did not realise that I was responding to Conrad’s commitment in his Preface to *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* to presenting ‘the obscure lives of a few

individuals out of all the disregarded multitude of the bewildered, the simple, and the voiceless.' Nor did I realise then that I would become preoccupied, especially in my teaching, by the great task that Wordsworth (as far as I'm aware) initiated, of how to give voice to the voiceless, and of the difficulties of representing them using 'the real language of men.' (Hence, incidentally my interest in, and work on the great, neglected Nebraskan novelist and photographer, Wright Morris, whose work I urge you all to peruse.)

In 1961 I had, in fact, not read much English Literature and Conrad's astonishing ironic method working for both pity and scorn was new to me, and my tears took me by surprise. And, of course, I never thought of them as a fit subject for an undergraduate essay. I was then, however, owing to my theological interests, a devotee of Dostoevsky, and I had devoured *Crime and Punishment*, *The Devils* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. And, if I remember rightly, I wrote a superficial, look-at-me-I've-read-Dostoevsky essay on *The Secret Agent* and *Nostramo* on the ways that Conrad's 'caricatural presentation' ('Author's Note') of Vladimir the cynical Russian diplomat and the motley anarchists and of such vain, foolish figures as General Montero and Sotillo reminded me of Dostoevsky's scornful, often savagely funny portrayals of such muddled social theorists as Lebezniatkov in *Crime and Punishment* and Shigalov in *The Devils*. I cannot resist citing the latter, who offers to his fellow dreamers 'my own system of world organisation so as to make any further thinking unnecessary' only to discover that 'my conclusion is in direct contradiction to the original idea with which I start. Starting from unlimited freedom, I arrived at unlimited despotism. I will add, however, that there can be no other solution of the social formula than mine'. (I discovered years later that Conrad's pithy version of the same appalling [prophetic?] possibility [truth?] appears in an early letter of 1885: 'Socialism must inevitably end in Caesarism' (*Collected Letters*, 1, p.16)). Little did I know then that Conrad's complicated relationship and response to, and repudiation of, Dostoevsky would loom so large in my teaching and writing life.

I do not have time to dwell at the same length on *Lord Jim* and *Nostramo*. The sequence from the former that made me cry terminates chapter XXXIII and it records Marlow's anguished conversation with Jewel the day before he leaves Patusan for the last time. Jewel is fearful because she is convinced that Jim will one day leave her and she is puzzled because she knows 'There is something he can never forget.' Marlow sets himself the task of exorcising her fears and he assures her that 'in the whole wide world there was no one who ever would need his heart, his mind his hand':

'... 'Why?' she murmured. I felt the kind of rage one feels during a hard tussle. ... 'Why?' she repeated louder; 'tell me!' And as I remained confounded, she stamped her foot like a spoilt child. 'Why? Speak.' 'You want to know' I asked in a fury. 'Yes!' she cried. 'Because he is not good enough,' I said brutally. ... Without raising her voice, she threw into it an infinity of scathing contempt, bitterness and despair.

'This is the very thing he said. . . . You lie!'

'The last two words she cried at me in the native dialect. 'Hear me out!' I entreated; she caught her breath tremulously, flung my arm away. 'Nobody, nobody is good enough,' I began with the greatest earnestness. I could hear the sobbing labour of her breath frightfully quickened. I hung my head. What was the use? Footsteps were approaching; I slipped away without another word. . . .'

My instant tears over Marlow's earnest 'Nobody, nobody is good enough' were (again) uncomplicated because they were sobs of self-recognition. I knew that, like Jim, I would never be faithful to 'that ideal conception of one's personality every man sets up for

himself secretly' – especially a 20-year-old ex-theology student who had rejected the evangelical Christian faith of his youth and adolescence. Such tears, however, did perhaps testify to the perennial attraction (especially for the young?) of Conrad's multi-faceted, complex, yet tender presentation of the great themes of lost honour and the search for redemption.

My third passage closes Part Third, chapter Three of *Nostramo* which recounts the hasty exodus in the dark of the Blancos from Sulaco to the Campo where their safety has been guaranteed by Hernandez, a bandit they had always feared, but who is now in the topsy-turvy world of Costaguanan politics translated into 'a general in the memorable last official act of the Ribierist party, whose watchwords were honesty, peace, and, progress.' Gould has accompanied Antonia and her stricken father Don José to the ford outside the town when he is accosted by 'The emissary and compadre of Hernandez' who 'spurred his horse up close':

'Has not the master of the mine any message to send to Hernandez, the master of the campo?'

The truth of the comparison struck Charles Gould heavily. In his determined purpose he held the mine, and the indomitable bandit held the Campo by the same precarious tenure. They were equals before the lawlessness of the land. It was impossible to disentangle one's activities from its debasing contacts. A close-meshed net of crime and corruption lay upon the whole country. An immense and weary discouragement sealed his lips for a time.

'You are a just man,' urged the emissary of Hernandez. 'Look at those people who made my compadre a general and have turned us all into soldiers. Look at those oligarchs fleeing for life, with only the clothes on their backs. My compadre does not think of that, but our followers may be wondering greatly, and I would speak of them to you. Listen señor! ... soldiers must have their pay to live honestly when the wars are over. It is believed that your soul is so just that a prayer from you would cure the sickness of every beast, like the orison of an upright judge. Let me have some words from your lips that that would act like a charm upon the doubts of our *partida*, where all are men'

'Do you hear what he says?' Charles Gould said in English to Antonia.

'Forgive us our misery!' she exclaimed, hurriedly. 'It is your character that is the inexhaustible treasure which may save us all yet; your character, Carlos, not your wealth. I entreat you to give this man your word that you will accept any arrangement my uncle may make with their chief. One word. He will want no more.'

On the site of the roadside hut there remained nothing but an enormous heap of embers, throwing afar a darkening red glow, in which Antonia's face appeared deeply flushed with excitement. Charles Gould with only a short hesitation, pronounced the required pledge. He was like a man who had ventured on a precipitous task with no room to turn, where the only safety is to press forward. At that moment he understood it thoroughly as he looked down on at Don José stretched out, hardly breathing, by the side of the erect Antonia, vanquished in a lifelong struggle with the powers of moral darkness, whose stagnant depths breed monstrous crimes and monstrous illusions.

My tears over Antonia's hurried exclamation, 'Forgive us our misery!' (not our trespasses) were, looking back, rather grown-up compared to the self-pity lurking behind my sobs over Winnie and Jim. In some dim way I was responding to Conrad's tragic vision of the terrible odds stacked against the possibility of a decent civic life in lawless Costaguana,

where competing factions and antagonisms and human greed and vanity rendered any political solution impossible; and we share Gould's anguished dismal recognition that 'a close-meshed net of crime and corruption lay upon the whole country' and that noble, patriotic idealists such as Don José are 'vanquished in a lifelong struggle with the powers of moral darkness'. Comparable, as I learned subsequently, to both Conrad's parents and the Russians in *Under Western Eyes* who endured what the old teacher of languages describes as 'the moral corruption of an oppressed society where the love of justice, the sense of pity, and even the fidelity of simple minds are prostituted to the lust of hate and fear, the inseparable companions of an uneasy despotism'. (Such powerful, comprehensive, and tragic formulations, incidentally, sound a new note in the English novel and indicate why Conrad is much the greatest political novelist in our language. He knew, as Eloise Knapp Hay said many years ago, that politics constitutes 'the great spring of modern tragedy'.)

Antonia's plea both moves and disturbs us because her appeal to Gould's 'character that is the inexhaustible treasure that may save us all yet' depends on a dubious distinction that, inadvertently, alerts us to Gould's consuming faith in 'material interests', in the benefits of capitalism, when the silver mine itself is the locus of the antagonisms between the poor and the rich and which we learn at the end will generate a clash between the emerging communists and the Blancos. And as Dr Monygham pronounces, 'There is no peace ... in the development of material interests.' Moreover, the emissary of Hernandez's deluded, superstitious faith in the justness of Gould's 'soul' and in his magical restorative powers is both touching and mistaken, amusing and desperately sad, as is the Blanco's ready and ignorant belief that Father Corbelán 'has wrought a miracle in the heart of a most merciless robber.' *Nostramo* is both an analysis and a prophecy of the issues and conflicts that have dominated so-called Third World countries for well over a hundred years. 'It examines,' as I wrote some thirty years ago, 'the attempt to graft Western capitalist enterprise, cultural norms, and political institutions, upon the stock of a peasant, superstitious, undeveloped country, recently emerging out of Spanish colonial rule, and governed by a series of 'pronunciamentos' which have rendered the country chronically unstable.' Looking back, I realise that my tears were temperamental, expressive of the sheer helplessness and rage that I, and I am sure many here today feel every day, as we read about and see on television the terrible effects of global capitalism, of Western invasions of the Middle-East and Afghanistan, of the corruption, greed, factionalism, and sectarianism that is displacing thousands of 'poor humanity' in lawless countries where competing antagonisms eschew compromise, rendering their countries ungovernable. 'The powers of moral darkness' encompass East and West and their 'stagnant depths breed monstrous crimes and monstrous illusions' that have become our daily bread.

On that cheerful note may I thank you all, on behalf of the Joseph Conrad Society (UK), for being here and for ensuring that our 40th Anniversary Conference was an enriching experience for us all. The presence of 76 people from 23 countries confirms that our Society thrives and has a fine future. I wish all of you, and especially beginning Conradians, success in your careers and I look forward to reading your work on our beloved Conrad.