

# Conrad's Western World

# NORMAN SHERRY



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

# CONRAD'S WESTERN WORLD

NORMAN SHERRY

*Professor of English, University of Lancaster*

CAMBRIDGE  
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS

1971

Published by the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press  
Bentley House, 200 Euston Road, London N.W.1  
American Branch: 32 East 57th Street, New York, N.Y. 10022

Cambridge University Press 1971

Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number: 70-130910

ISBN: 0 521 07972 1

Printed in Great Britain  
at the University Printing House, Cambridge  
(Brooke Crutchley, University Printer)

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## *Illustrations*

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### 7c Sir William Harcourt

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### 8c Martial Bourdin

From the *Daily Graphic*, 1894.

*In memory of Peter Ure*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The following study could not have been carried out without the help of many scholars, descendants of men who knew Conrad, and certain institutions. Research into the background of *Heart of Darkness* was made possible by the help of John Carrington of the Université Libre du Congo, to whom I was introduced by Professor Robert Steel of the University of Liverpool; the Reverend Angus MacNeil of the Baptist Mission Station at Bolobo, to whom I was introduced by Professor Roger Anstey of the University of Kent; the Reverend B. W. O. Amey of the Baptist Missionary Society headquarters in London who gave me permission to read the diaries of the Reverend George Grenfell which are lodged there; Roland G. Metzger of the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society of Valley Forge, Pennsylvania; Dr R. E. Ockenden of the British Council, London, who put me in touch with Miss Kathryn Dexter and Robin Stubbs in Brussels; Captain H. Robdrup of the Monstrings- & Forhyringsvaesenet in Copenhagen who was untiring in helping me to track down Danish seamen who had worked in the Congo during Conrad's stay there, and who put me in touch with Miss Duhst, only living daughter of Captain Duhst, who knew Conrad for a short time in the Congo; Captain Krüger of the East Asiatic Company who assisted me with information about Captain Koch, master of the *Roi des Belges*; M. Vereecke, Chairman of the Associated Central West Africa Lines; Dr P. Davies of the Department of Economics and Commerce, the University of Liverpool; Mr H. F. C. Hussey of the Board of Trade, Cardiff; Mr K. R. Mason, shipping editor of *Lloyd's Records*; Mr Lugard of the Dutch House, Nieuwe Afrikaansche Handels-Vennootschap; the British Ambassador

## Acknowledgements

in Kinchassa; the Captain Superintendent of H.M.S. *Conway* for information about G. F. W. Hope; David Garnett for answering my questions about his father, Edward Garnett, and Conrad; Mrs Jean Hope, widow of Herford Hope, G. F. W. Hope's son, and her son Mr Roger Hope of Liverton, Newton Abbot, who provided me with Hope's typescript dealing with Conrad and with a photograph of the *Nellie*; Donald Wilson and Michael Freyne of the Department of French, the University of Liverpool; Miss Marjorie G. Wynne of Yale University Library for unfailing courtesy and assistance, and the John Quinn Memorial Collection Manuscript Division, the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

My research into the sources of *Nostromo* principally involved a study of the literature on South America and in this area I am primarily in debt to librarians: to Miss Gillian Hepworth of the Cohen Library, University of Liverpool for her vast patience in handling my various requests for books; Mr Ingham of the Picton Reference Library, Liverpool; Bernard Naylor, Librarian of the Institute of Latin American Studies, who sent me the galley proofs of his recent checklist of travellers' accounts of the area in the nineteenth century; Tony Newell of the Cohen Library. In addition I am indebted to J. R. Fisher of the Department of Modern History, University of Liverpool; Mrs Dorothea Smith of Liverpool, who helped me to contact the Mayor of Luri and Cesar Cervoni's son in Marseilles, and to whom I was introduced by Professor C. A. Mayer of the University of Liverpool.

For information on the sources of *The Secret Agent* my thanks are due to Mr Dodds, Public Relations Officer of New Scotland Yard who, if he was not able to provide much information, treated my many queries with patience and good manners; to M. Carlo Laroche, Le Conservateur en chef de la Section Outre-Mer, Archives de France; Stephen



## *Acknowledgements*

Clissold, of the Foreign Office Research Department; Professor Hugh Seton Watson; R. C. H. Briggs, secretary of the William Morris Society; John Bebbington of Sheffield City Library who allowed me to browse through the Edward Carpenter Collection there; Mr C. G. Allen of the British Library of Political and Economic Science; Mr Clive E. Driver of the Rosenbach Foundation for assistance over the manuscript of 'The Informer'; Mr Darlington, Archivist of the Greater London Record Office; the Superintendent of the Hampstead Cemetery; various Chief Constables who helped me with reference to the anarchist outrages of the nineteenth century—Chief Constable Muir of Durham Constabulary, Chief Constable Hood of Manchester Constabulary, Chief Constable Goodchild of the West Midlands Constabulary, Chief Constable Barker of Sheffield and Rotherham Constabulary; Mr Henchy of the National Library of Ireland; Miss D. M. Moss of the Radio Times Hulton Picture Library; the editors of The Illustrated London News & Sketch Ltd.; the Town Clerk of Poole; the Third Secretary of the British Embassy in Buenos Aires who traced a descendant of Krieger for me; the Town Clerk of Colchester, Mr Catchpole; the Borough Librarian of Colchester, P. R. Gifford; Mrs Helen Rossetti Angeli, who at ninety years of age was of wonderful assistance; Mrs Dennis, her daughter; Leonard Gribble, authority on the British police, who suggested books that might be of use to me; Professor David Quinn of the University of Liverpool, Owen Dudley Edwards of the University of Aberdeen, Professor R. Dudley Edwards of University College, Dublin, Professor Pender of University College, Cork, for their assistance in Fenian matters; Allan Smith, David Goodway, Miss Ella Twynam, another nonagenarian who knew the London Anarchists, Rudolf de Jong of the Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis, for assistance in anarchist matters; Edward Thompson, the School

## *Acknowledgements*

of History, University of Warwick, Professor Lyons of the University of Kent at Canterbury who provided me with a list of useful books on Fenian matters; the descendant of A. P. Krieger, Mrs Beatrice Ogilvie, for two letters from Conrad to her grandfather and information about her grandfather; Mr Mann of Poole, a centenarian who helped me to trace the Krieger family, and Mr John G. Hillier who discovered Mr Mann for me; Mrs Hinnell; the Reverend Charles B. Dobree, Incumbent of St Mary's, Brent Eleigh, who sought out an unknown Conrad manuscript for me.

My gratitude is also due to A. van Marle of Amsterdam with whom I have been in contact now since 1966 and who has given his help so unstintingly that it is not possible to detail it here; the late Richard Curle, Conrad's great friend, and John Conrad, Conrad's younger son, for their assistance and interest; Professor Edward Shils who has not swerved in his interest in and support for my research; to Professor Kenneth Muir of the University of Liverpool, J. I. M. Stewart of Christ Church, Oxford, J. C. Maxwell of Balliol College, Oxford, and Jocelyn Baines, author of the definitive biography of Conrad, Brian Nellist of the University of Liverpool, and A. van Marle, all of whom gave me help in terms of reading the manuscript at various stages, of discussing the study with me, and of making useful suggestions. Mention must be made of the late J. D. Gordan, whose study of sources inevitably provides inspiration for anyone entering this field and of Jocelyn Baines whose biography of Conrad has been my daily companion.

I should like to thank Mrs M. Thompson for her industry and patience in the typing of the manuscript and Miss Margaret Burton for her support in this.

Finally, my gratitude is due to the late Professor Peter Ure whose death occurred as I was finishing the manuscript and to whom the book is dedicated in memory of a fine scholar

## Acknowledgements

and man who fifteen years ago mapped out for me the direction these studies should take.

Some parts of this study have appeared in the *Review of English Studies* (vol. 18, 1967), *Modern Language Review* (vol. 64, 1969) and the *Philological Quarterly* (vol. 48, 1969), and I am grateful to the editors and publishers of these journals for permission to reprint. I am indebted to Yale University Library for permission to quote from Conrad's manuscripts and to J. M. Dent and Sons, the publishers and trustees of the Joseph Conrad estate for permission to publish the newly found Conrad letters and to use quotations from their Collected Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad (London, 1947) to which reference is made throughout.

N.S.

December, 1970

## NOTE

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## I

# INTRODUCTION

In *Conrad's Eastern World* I tried to recreate the world Conrad knew during his years as a sailor in far eastern waters between 1883 and 1888. I was concerned there on the one hand to make a contribution to Conrad biography, since those significant years had remained relatively undocumented, and on the other to seek out those suggestions in the life of the east, in the gossip of the ports, which became Conrad's heritage as a seaman and which were used by Conrad the novelist. Conrad himself suggested the possibility of his inspiration having derived from actual events and people when he stated: 'One's literary life must turn frequently for sustenance to memories and seek discourse with the shades. . .'<sup>1</sup> Events of which he retained 'memories' might have been noted in official records or newspapers of the area; 'shades' might be those of once-living men whose descendants might be traced. Biography and source material were, therefore, intimately linked in the case of those stories which returned to his experiences in the far east for their inspiration.

In this sequel to *Conrad's Eastern World* the direction could not be the same. The works selected for study ranged over the period 1896 to 1906 in terms of dates of composition, and only one major work, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), and one short story, 'An Outpost of Progress' (1896), looked back to Conrad's personal experience, in this instance his Congo visit of 1890-1. Thus, the biographical element must of necessity be smaller, since Conrad's life *as a writer* is well documented and that life, except in certain specific circum-

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stances, did not provide source material for the works being dealt with. The world of a South American republic or of the London anarchists was not in any substantial way part of Conrad's experience either at the time of writing *Nostromo* (1904) and *The Secret Agent* (1906) or at any period earlier in his life.

I have, however, been able to make certain contributions to Conrad biography where it is important to the works studied. Conrad's period in the Congo has been further illuminated by the addition of new material, and an unusual but interesting influence upon Conrad revealed by the study is that of certain friendships he formed in the course of his life, particularly those with G. F. W. Hope, A. P. Krieger, R. B. Cunninghame Graham, and Ford Madox Ford. All of these friendships in some way affected his creative life. Graham and Ford not only guided Conrad towards particular subjects for novels, but each contributed further in supplying Conrad with necessary background material and to a slight degree with the inspiration for particular characters based upon themselves. It would seem likely, for example, that Charles Gould in *Nostromo* owes something in history and appearance to Graham, and that Ford makes an appearance in 'The Informer'. G. F. W. Hope, Conrad's sailor friend, made his contribution to *Heart of Darkness* and I have been fortunate in discovering a formerly unknown account of Conrad written by Hope. A. P. Krieger, until now a shadowy and insubstantial figure in Conrad's life, can be seen to have been involved, if my account of him is acceptable, in an unexpected but substantial way in *The Secret Agent*.

In the course of my search certain un hoped-for bonuses came my way: one was an early and previously unknown manuscript by Conrad taking the form of notes for a novel, the other was an unexpected contact with the son of one of Conrad's friends of his Mediterranean days—Cesar Cervoni.

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So far as Conrad's source material was concerned, it became possible to detect a strong movement away from inspired analyses of personal experience or the related experiences of others (which is in some ways the mark of an amateur) to the contemplation of material entirely outside the bounds of his own experience (which in some ways is the mark of a professional). Such a movement, for some of his works at least, was inevitable. Conrad drew a great deal upon his past experience, but this was bound to be worked out in time. To Cunninghame Graham he wrote on 7 October 1907, 'Living with memories is a cruel business. I—who have a double life one of them peopled only by shadows growing more precious as the years pass—know what that is.'<sup>2</sup> And so an extension of possible subjects by means of reading was a natural development. More and more, as he progressed as a novelist, Conrad turned to reading, not simply as in his early days in order to buttress his limited knowledge of the far east, but in order to find the plot itself, the characters in all their variety, and the themes. In writing to his aunt, Madame Poradowska, after the French translation of *The Secret Agent* had appeared, Conrad said: 'for you well know that anarchy and anarchists are outside my experience... I created this out of whole cloth',<sup>3</sup> and I hope to show how far Conrad went in order to create *The Secret Agent* 'out of whole cloth'. A vast literature must have been 'consumed' by Conrad in his study prior to the beginning of a novel. That it was precisely in those subjects where he was farthest from his own basic experience that he succeeded most, is a measure of this remarkable novelist's extraordinary achievement.

For Conrad, writing was a 'cruel business': 'I sit down religiously every morning, I sit down for eight hours every day—and the sitting down is all. In the course of that working day of 8 hours, I write 3 sentences which I erase... sometimes



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it takes all my resolution and power of self control to refrain from butting my head against the wall.'<sup>4</sup> It became no less cruel, no less arduous when it was a matter of breathing life into material derived primarily from reading than it had been when he was mainly resuscitating memories of the past.

Finally, the change in source material reveals a change of interest. The exploration of the nature of such qualities as 'courage' and 'fidelity' within an isolated, dangerous, but morally neutral area of sea or river has given way to an interest in more public concerns, and as the settings have moved from the far east to the 'western world' of South America, the Congo, and London, so the interest now lies partly in the examination of the nature of specifically 'western' movements—colonial exploitation, material progress, left-wing revolutions. The individual is now seen in relation to such backgrounds, and thus the three major works studied are related as explorations of 'man in society'. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad deals with a primitive society but one which is both explored and exploited by the colonists from a more evolved society; here his concern is with the extent to which, once he is in a situation of isolation and primitiveness, the disciplined white man is sustained by a code of behaviour evolved in his civilised society. In *Nostromo*, Conrad moved from a primitive society to a young emerging one, where the struggle is for social power and wealth; the forces here—the greed, power-hungriness and awful cruelty—blindly promote or impede or are stimulated by the actual building-up of the economic substructure, the 'material interests'. In his 'darkest' novel, *The Secret Agent*, Conrad turns to the fully evolved society which in contrast is liberal, relatively humane and protected, yet which has its underside of cruelty and savage force, where even love kills people. It is Conrad's ability to see through the public claims being