

THE CONRADIAN

Journal of the Joseph Conrad Society (U.K.)



Vol 21

Spring 1996

No 1

THE CONRADIAN
Journal of the Joseph Conrad Society (U.K.)

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Contributions (2 copies) in the form of articles, short notes, or other items of Conradian interest should be sent to the General Editor at: Department of English, University of Dundee, DD1 4HN, U.K. (e-mail: A.M.Roberts@Dundee.ac.uk). See back cover for outline style conventions; a full style sheet is available from the General Editor on request. Prior to publication, contributors will be asked to submit texts on disc, preferably in Word for Windows or Wordperfect.

The Conradian is indexed in the MLA International Bibliography, The Year's Work in English Studies, Abstracts in English Studies, and Victorian Studies. Requests for permission to reprint should be addressed to: Editions Rodopi B.V., Keizersgracht 302-304, 1016 EX Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

The Joseph Conrad Society (U.K.) is a registered charity under the Charity Act 1960, register number 270586.

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ISSN: 0951-2314

Printed in The Netherlands

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THE SOCIOLOGY OF TEXTS: INTRODUCTION

Robert Hampson
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The History of the Book

Donald F MacKenzie, in his essay 'The History of the Book', offers a brief survey of the development of Anglo-American bibliography in the twentieth century.¹ The priorities for bibliography in the early part of the century were set by A W P Nard, S B McKelvey and W W Greg, and the emphasis fell on the development of the text (of a limited corpus of English classics) from manuscript to print. Subsequently, John Johnson, Strickland Gibson, Stanley Morrison and others extended bibliography to include interest in the book trade; the history of printing and selling; studies of publishers and their relations with authors. More recently, after the publication of Lucien Febvre and H J Martin's *L'Apparition du livre* (1958), the influence of French *histoire du livre* has led to more complex models of text production. To begin with, MacKenzie argues, the range and diversity of surviving stages of the text for modern writers rendered untenable the idea of a single authoritative edition: 'Their relation one to another came to be seen less in terms of their descent from a common archetype and more as differing responses, each with its own integrity, to distinct publishing contexts' (295). Secondly, publication and sale 'at different times, places, and prices' (297) in different formats and bindings could be seen to constitute different meanings and readings; meanings constructed by the interpretative acts of writers, designers, printers, and readers. The 'history of the book' then becomes a study of the changing

¹ D. F. MacKenzie, 'History of the Book', in Peter Davison, *The Book Encompassed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 290-301.

conditions of meaning and reading, and, thereby, opens onto the reconstruction of intellectual and cultural history.

Textual Criticism

Jerome J McGann has offered a similar challenge to analytic bibliography. Between 1977 and 1983, McGann engaged in what became a programme for the historical study of literary works in opposition to the ahistorical procedures (whether New Critical, structural or poststructural) dominating hermeneutics.² Through Bakhtin, he came at the text not as a linguistic event but as a cultural event in socio-historical space, a grid of 'social and historical filiations', 'a nexus of various concrete social determinants' (5).

What he called 'a sociological poetics' (62) became central to analysis: attending to when, where, and by whom texts were published, and ending the institutional isolation of the literary work from its social and historical contexts. This involved a reconceptualisation of not just the literary work but also of critical methodology and meaning. Critical methodology embraced 'the history of the literary work's textualizations and the history of its reception'(10); while meaning was reconceived as 'the process by which literary works are produced and reproduced' (10). In his essay, 'The Monks and the Giants: Textual and Bibliographical Studies and the Interpretation of Literary Works' (1981-2),³ McGann, through a historical account of bibliography from the Renaissance, sought to free bibliography from the dominant editorial conception of textual studies and to integrate textual and bibliographical study with critical and/or interpretative activity:

Textual criticism does not meet its fate in the completion of a text or an edition of some particular work. Rather, it is a special method which students of literature must and should use when they examine, interpret, and reproduce the works we inherit from the past. (76-7)

² See Jerome J McGann, *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

³ *The Beauty of Inflections*, 69-89.

Instead of the author-centredness of the editorial conception of textual studies, McGann directs attention to non-authorial textual determinants: 'that complex network of people, materials, and events which have produced and continue to reproduce the literary works which history delivers into our hands' (80). In other words, as McGann argued in *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (1983), literature is a collaborative art, and the collaborators include publishers' editors, designers, printers, and all those involved in the social process of bringing the text of a work to the public.

The Sociology of Texts

The title of this section of this issue of *The Conradian* is derived from Donald MacKenzie's 1985 Panizzi Lectures 'Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts'.⁴ MacKenzie sought in these lectures to 'sketch an extended role for bibliography' (ix) in a context where books were only one form of text and in response to developments in critical theory and practice. He argued that there had been, in effect, a paradigm shift in bibliography, a shift from questions of authorial intention and textual authority to questions of dissemination and readership in relation to both economic and political perspectives. Historical bibliography (as distinct from descriptive or analytic bibliography and stemmatics) moved from the margins to the centre, as it emphasised the interaction of text and society as a source of cultural history, examining 'the human motives and interactions which texts involve at every stage of their production, transmission and consumption ... the roles of institutions, and their own complex structures, in affecting the forms of social discourse' (6-7). His pragmatic account of what bibliographers do in order to define bibliography's field of study also made clear how the history of the book becomes a record of cultural change:

⁴ Donald F MacKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (London: British Library, 1985).

...it is the only discipline which has consistently studied the composition, formal design and transmission of texts by writers, printers, and publishers; their distribution through different communities by wholesalers, retailers, and teachers; their collection and classification by librarians; their meaning for, and ... their creative regeneration by, readers. (4)

The essays collected here attend to some of that multiplicity of forces that enter into the production and reproduction of the text. Cedric Watts examines Edward Garnett's role as one of Conrad's 'collaborators' - as publisher's reader, as publicist, as mediator between Conrad and his readership - and as a 'generator of literary taste'. Ray Brebach considers Richard Curle's mediating role as journalist and popularizing critic during the last twelve years of Conrad's life. Peter McDonald demonstrates how the writing of *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* was shaped by the various agendas, political and aesthetic, of Henley's *New Review*. Susan Jones's essay on *Chance* explores how reading practices are constructed by the context of publication and, in particular, how illustrations and story combine to form a single narrative unit.

CONRAD AND CURLE

Raymond Brebach
Drexel University

Richard Curle was by all accounts (including his own) the great friend of Conrad's later years. He met Conrad in 1912 and wrote frequently about him during the entire course of their friendship and indeed long after. The Teets/Gerber bibliography contains close to thirty entries under Curle's name, dating from 1912 to 1964 (Curle died in 1968). His memoir of Conrad, *The Last Twelve Years of Joseph Conrad*, came out in 1928. Like *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance*, the memoir by Ford Madox Ford, it has fallen into obscurity. Indeed, *Last Twelve Years* has had, if anything, less impact on Conrad biography than Ford's book. Having long felt that Ford's book—if read on its own terms—conveys valuable insights into an important relationship and an important period in Conrad's career, I began this study curious about Curle's memoir. What I find, in looking at the Curle-Conrad relationship as a whole, is that Conrad saw in Curle an enthusiastic young appreciator whose writing could serve a useful public relations role.

Last Twelve Years is not a history of Conrad's last years, nor is it an account of his friendship with Curle. In his 'Preface' Curle says that 'the purpose of my study is really to supplement the facts that are already known, and to put Conrad, as a man, in as complete a light as I can.' He goes on to say that while he doesn't expect his study to satisfy all Conrad's friends, 'at least it has the benefit of accuracy within its scope, which is more than can be said of some of the statements relating to him which have found publicity since his death' (v). I'm sure that he refers here to Ford's book.

(Interestingly enough, both Curle and Ford claim to have depended almost entirely on their memories in writing their books. Curle adds that he supplemented his memory with reference to Conrad's correspondence. I would add that *Conrad to a Friend*: 150

Selected Letters was also published in 1928, and that Curle undoubtedly felt that the purchaser of one book might certainly be interested in the other.)

Last Twelve Years is divided into twelve chapters, each covering a general theme: 'Conrad as a Friend,' 'The Personality of Conrad,' 'Conrad's Talk,' and so forth. Each chapter contains a series of brief impressions or what might be called 'illustrative assertions' about its theme. Three illustrations should give the flavor of the book. The first is from the chapter on Conrad's personality:

There was, at heart, a noble simplicity about his attitude towards life; but he was the least obvious of men and it was often difficult to follow his thought through the complexity of his outer moods and the play of reminiscence upon the argument of the instant. It was so difficult, indeed, that without that insight which arises from intuition all sorts of erroneous conclusions might have been formed. But when one did begin to know Conrad, one saw, as though through a mazy forest, the steady beacon of his fidelity to an ideal and to that inner sobriety of which he writes. He never altered in these fundamental things, because his roots were clear and deep. [And so forth] (25)

The second comes from the chapter titled 'Conrad at Home.'

At the back of Oswalds there was a covered porch facing a formal Dutch garden, and there, on mild summer mornings, Conrad would sit for half an hour before lunch and enjoy the the trim beauty of the beds. My own opinion is that, profoundly and passionately concerned as he was in his creative life with the drama of human affairs, nothing to do with the outer world of the senses affected him intensely; but I think that the order and loveliness of external nature acted as a sort of panacea to the problems that disturbed his brain unceasingly. Certainly, he had a marvelous capacity for throwing off his troubles at such moments and talking with the inconsequent gaiety of a schoolboy. Just as he would laugh at the birds hopping about his lawn, pointing to one after another, so would he comment upon his flowers, as though he really had nothing else in the world to bother about. (127)

My third example comes from a chapter titled 'Stray Recollections of Conrad.'

Before Conrad's play, *The Secret Agent*, was put on the stage he came one day to London to be present at a rehearsal. I had asked him whether he

would like to meet at lunch a very intelligent girl friend of mine. He replied that he would. The lunch took place at the Savoy, and the talk between this girl in her early twenties and the famous Conrad was really delicious. And I do not mean that it was delicious because there was anything quaint about it, but delicious in the mutual quick sympathy of the minds and easy give and take of ideas between youth and age. I shall never forget how, coming across the lounge, I saw them sitting together on the sofa, as it might have been father and daughter. Conrad was always particularly gracious to youth. His sympathy with the younger generation had a quality of complete unselfconsciousness about it, and I really do not think that he knew the meaning of the word 'condescension.' (159)

I quote at length to give a flavor of the book as a whole. Two things become clear in these quotations. The first is the awe—the veneration—in which the book holds Conrad. The windy generalizations of the first example are typical of the opening adoring chapters of the book.

The second is a sense of the picture we are given of Conrad. It is a picture in which Curle is very much in evidence, mediating between his subject and his reader. As the last two examples suggest, Curle seems unwilling to give the facts and let them speak for themselves. Just as a scene begins to unfold or a story begins to take shape, Curle steps in to interpret, so that the book is forever jumping from premise or opening scene to conclusion without really giving a conversation or a story or an extended presentation of evidence. Curle is always there to digest the specifics for us and to give us his conclusions and interpretations about his Conrad. After a while a reader must wish that Curle had taken a cue from Conrad and tried to make us *see*.

The book does contain some interesting information of the kind one might hope would come out of such a personal memoir—for example, Conrad thought that the collecting of first editions was silly, but he was a good sport about presenting Curle with copies of his books and about inscribing them with comments—but that information, those humanizing touches which ought to give us the picture of the man himself which is promised in the preface, are overshadowed by the long stretches of 'appreciation' of Conrad's greatness. The book contains little that is not laudatory about Conrad, and it participates fully in the building of a reputation, in the deification of the dead writer.

It is instructive to step back from the memoir itself and see how Curle developed this relationship or role in his association with Conrad. Joseph Conrad and Richard Curle met in 1912. Curle had written an article on Conrad for the magazine *Rhythm*, which Edward Garnett showed to an appreciative Conrad. The article is naive, enthusiastic and superficial, but it appealed to Conrad, as Najder believes, for three reasons: it failed to define Conrad in terms of a formula, it stressed his unique qualities, and it praised the impression created by his work. (381) The two men met at one of Garnett's regular Tuesday lunches at the Mont Blanc restaurant in London, and shortly thereafter Conrad invited Curle to visit him at Capel House (Karl 721-22; Najder 381).

Whether or not Conrad himself realized it, in his budding relationship with Curle we find a rough parallel with his early relationship with Ford. Both younger men were in their mid to late 20's, both were budding writers, both were in positions to provide help *and* to benefit from relationship with Conrad. In a well known 1898 letter to Henley, Conrad says of collaboration with Ford,

When talking with Hueffer my first thought was that the man there who couldn't find a publisher had some good stuff to use and that if we worked it up together my name, probably, would get a publisher for it. On the other hand I thought that working with him would keep under the particular devil that spoils my work for me as quick as I turn it out ..., and the material being of the kind that appeals to my imagination and the man being an honest workman we could turn out something tolerable—perhaps.... The affair had a material rather than an artistic aspect for me. (Baines 217-18)

The Curle relationship had a clear material aspect as well. In 1912 Conrad was not the critically accepted but struggling writer who began collaboration with Ford in order to make some quick money, but rather, as Karl suggests, one of the emerging 'grand old men of English letters' (722), with larger matters than a quick and dirty potboiler on his mind. By July, 1913 Conrad is writing to Curle,

My dear fellow, I am unaffectedly glad to know that you are undertaking the task [of writing a book length study of Conrad's work]. All I can say is that when you want me for anything I am at your disposal—to give information or elucidate a point. I say this without reserve because I feel a complete confidence in you.

On my part I have written Doubleday (in America), my future publisher there, saying that you are about to write such a book and that I would wish them to publish it. More I couldn't say just at present.

If for instance, the Yank press receives your study of Conrad well there would be an opening for you then to write about other Europeans of letters—the sort of nourishment they need much, and of which, one must render them justice, they are rather greedy.

Once your name becomes familiar to their democratic ear, they will be ready for reception of stories and novels. Great thing is to affirm your existence first. (*Conrad to a Friend* 7, 'Friday [July, 1913]')

This quotation is from only the sixth letter in Curle's *Conrad to a Friend* collection, and while there were undoubtedly other letters between the two men between November, 1912, and July, 1913, I think it does show the speed with which their relationship developed its mutual benefit side. (Indeed, an even earlier letter from Conrad which Curle dates 31 March 1913 refers to an article on *Nostromo* which Curle proposed, and which Conrad says Pinker could probably place in the *North American Review*.) Conrad wanted to get his work before the public (particularly, here, the American public), and he saw Curle as a writer who in his earliest article passed the test of not pigeonholing Conrad as an exotic writer of the sea, who could, perhaps, be educated or kept on the right track, and whose book might provide a useful introduction to a new buying public. And notice the carrot of potential American sales of more of Curle's own work which Conrad holds out in this letter.

I believe that Curle himself did the early pursuing of Conrad, wrangling the initial introduction and proposing articles to the older writer, and I suspect that Conrad's early opinion of Curle was not as positive as it would later become. In a letter to Warrington Dawson dating from May or June of 1913, Conrad explains the arrangements for an overnight visit: 'at 11.30 a young man called Richard Curle (he writes—a queer creature) comes down for the day. He will go away at 8 o'clock....I shall meet you in Ashford 11.30 same train with Curle. That cannot be helped. But after he's gone we shall have a good evening together' (Randall 162).

It seems to me wise to remember that Curle was not at any stage of his relationship with Conrad the simple dupe of a callous old manipulator, but rather a working journalist and popularizing critic who

saw in Conrad a story, who pursued that story, and who was published—and paid for his work. He, as well as Conrad, understood the mutual benefit of the relationship.

Curle's book itself (the first book on Conrad) came out in 1914. Clearly aimed at a popular audience, it simplifies, pontificates, generalizes, and proceeds by assertion rather than by developed argument. After a chapter of biography and one of plot summaries, it is organized around themes ('Conrad's Atmosphere,' 'Conrad's Men,' 'Conrad's Women,' etc.). This pattern (the same we see in *Last Twelve Years* of 1928) allows Curle to skip rather freely and quickly from character to character and book to book. It has the advantages of exposing readers to the entire range of Conrad's work (something Conrad clearly wanted the book to do), while preventing Curle from developing any single point at length. This latter is of some importance, considering the questionable nature of some of his points. (For example, he calls Marlow a bore and says that the greater his presence and role in a work, the bigger a bore he is.)

The book received a number of negative reviews. Conrad was, however, quite supportive of Curle, and particularly in an April 1914 letter he tries to put the book in its best light and to predict its eventual critical acceptance. Does this mean that Conrad accepted Curle's naive interpretations and over simplifications? Najder believes that Conrad's support is the result of his loyalty to his friend, of his belief that the simplifications will lead to an expanded audience, and of his willingness to overlook some questionable assertions in the face of a larger body of acceptable interpretation (Najder 392). (That is to say, Curle got enough of it right to be forgiven some lapses—even if they are major ones.) Curle himself says in *Last Twelve Years* that Conrad was being kind and trying to cheer him up (also in *Conrad to a Friend*).

Conrad really had little choice but to be supportive. As *Conrad to a Friend* makes clear, Curle had sent Conrad both the manuscript and the proofs for comment. Four letters from Conrad in Curle's collection make reference to manuscript and proof revisions and suggest that these were quite minor, little more than printer's corrections. Perhaps the friendship had not progressed to a point where Conrad felt that he

could unload the full force of his opinion on Curle. Such was certainly not the case eight years later.

On April 24, 1922, Conrad wrote to Curle regarding the manuscript of an article titled 'Joseph Conrad in the East,' which identified some of Conrad's settings. He objects strongly to what Curle has done, saying that he has labored to leave some elements of setting imprecise:

Didn't it ever occur to you, my dear Curle, that I knew what I was doing in leaving the facts of my life and even of my tales in the background? Explicitness, my dear fellow, is fatal to the glamour of all artistic work, robbing it of all suggestiveness, destroying all illusion.

More to the point for us today, Conrad goes on to say that,

the dogmatic, ex-cathedra tone that you have adopted in your article positively frightens me.[Conrad then says that he is making some revisions on the manuscript to demonstrate his point.] I will only remark to you, my dear, that it is generally known that you are my intimate friend, that the text carries an air of authority and that a lot of damn-fools will ascribe to me the initiative and the sanction of all the views and facts expressed. (*Conrad to a Friend* 113-14)

Conrad's objection to Curle's tone might apply equally to *Last Twelve Years*. He dislikes the kind of windy appropriation of authority we see in the later book. Then he expresses some hope that Curle will play down the idea that his tales are gloomy, and he ends the letter by saying that he has told Pinker to expect this very article from Curle for placement in the United States!

Correspondence concerning this article continued for some time. Curle apparently offered to scrap it, but Conrad argues against that, suggests a few more revisions, and asks that references to tragedy in his work be downplayed. He concludes one letter by saying that

You are supposed to be the man who knows more about me than anybody else. Don't forget, my dear, that as a selling author my position is by no means assured in the U. S. yet; and the average mind shrinks from tragic issues. (117)

In a subsequent letter he hopes that Curle can work in something about story interest so that the man in the street (Conrad uses this term) might be made more interested in his work. Curle accepted most of the changes proposed by Conrad and the article was eventually published.

There is a pattern in this correspondence which we will see roughly duplicated in a 1923 set of letters: Initial rather forceful objection to what Conrad sees as an incorrect or wrong-headed interpretation is accompanied by actual manuscript corrections and by expressions of hope that the article will be placed. As the article proceeds toward publication Conrad becomes more wheedling in tone and his interest in American sales becomes clearer.

In June 1923, Curle began working on an article for TLS on the Uniform Edition of Conrad's novels. In his first letter on the article, Conrad objects, saying that the 'idea of giving a history of the books does not strike me as brilliant,' being by nature 'a second-hand thing.' Then he goes on to express the now familiar hope that Curle will be able to say something about Conrad's story telling and 'hint at some characteristics, that, perhaps, would arouse curiosity' (145).

In a long letter on this article (this one accompanying a draft), Conrad makes further attempts to structure Curle's article. He says that the article represents perhaps the last opportunity in his lifetime to free him of 'that infernal tail of ships.' He expresses concern that Curle's summaries of his Prefaces might, by giving the people 'the bones,' 'destroy their curiosity for the dish' (*Conrad to a Friend* July 14, 1923 147-48).

He makes some important statements about the nature of his 'art,' noting that 'my manner of telling, perfectly devoid of familiarity as between author and reader, aimed essentially at the intimacy of a personal communication.' He says that his art 'can be detected in my unconventional grouping and perspective, which are purely temperamental.' His art is neither romantic nor realistic, but rather 'fluid, depending on grouping (sequence) which shifts, and on the changing lights giving varied effects of perspective' (149).

Both Karl and Najder note the importance of this letter, and indeed of both the 1922 and 1923 exchanges of letters. They say that while Conrad's comments here are self serving, they are also good literary criticism, foreshadowing the impressionist label which will be

given to him. They also show Conrad laying the groundwork for the way he wants to be treated by his biographers (Karl 892-93; Najder 482).

I would emphasize the *context* within which Conrad's critical comments appear. In a letter dated 17 July 1923 Conrad talks at length about his finances: about the availability of money, contracts for articles, advances from Pinker, doctor's and dressmaker's bills. He goes on, 'I am afraid, my dear, that you think that I am unduly worrying about the affair of publicity for my uniform edition here; but you understand that the moment is perhaps critical. It may fix my position with the buying public. I have always tried to counteract the danger of precise classification, either in the realm of exoticism or of the sea.' And he says at the end of the letter, 'This damned sea business puts off as many people as it gathers in' (*Conrad to a Friend* 151-52; 153).

Throughout the correspondence regarding both of these articles, Conrad put his self-analytic literary criticism into the very practical context of increasing sales. He wants to avoid being lumped together with the 'exotic' writers or the 'writers of the sea' in part certainly because he sees his work as offering something more, but also because such classification might be bad for sales. And he sees Curle and Curle's articles as means of fighting such classification and establishing a favorable position in the mind of the book buying public.

Throughout the twelve years of their friendship, Curle pursued Conrad out of a sense of appreciation for his work, and, frankly, a sense that there were some stories about him to be written and a Boswell role to be played. (Near the beginning of *Last Twelve Years* Curle himself brings up Boswell and Johnson.) Conrad accepted Curle's public relations role, and by the 1920's he was willing to take a rather active hand in steering Curle's writing about him. There was real affection in the relationship, running both ways. Curle himself claims it, and I think his actions show it. Conrad's own letters (unreliable though they can be) express such affection, and his naming Curle one of his executors demonstrates a high level of trust. Such evidence as the very touching passage on Curle in John Conrad's book (197-202) goes a long way toward providing external confirmation. But the mutual benefit aspect of the relationship was also clear to both men. Curle

knew (and profited from) his public relations role, and Conrad counted on him to play it.

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