In search of Conrad

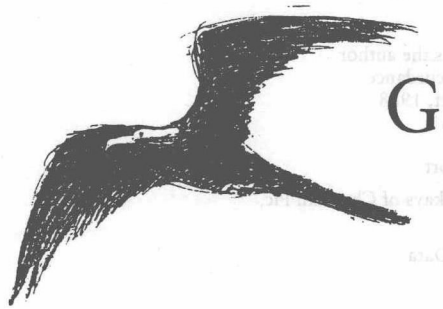
Gavin Young ; illustrated by Salim.

By the same author

Return to the Marshes
Iraq: Land of Two Rivers
Slow Boats to China
Slow Boats Home
Worlds Apart

Beyond Lion Rock:
The Story of Cathay Pacific Airways

In Search of Conrad



Gavin Young

Illustrations by Salim

Ah, Davidson, woe to the man whose heart
has not learned while young to hope,
to love—and to put its trust in life.

JOSEPH CONRAD, *Victory*

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Contents

For Gillon and Cari Aitken

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is hard to thank sufficiently Norman Sherry, whose meticulous and brilliant work of literary detection, *Conrad's Eastern World*, inspired my decision to attempt this adventure. Norman Sherry saw before I did the ghosts that move among the solid office buildings and on the tree-shaded Esplanade of modern Singapore, and, without knowing it, he passed me the word. His book gave me the final shove that sent me in pursuit of Conradian characters to far more distant places where in some cases they met their bitter ends – places Sherry, alas, could not visit because of the circumstances of a lively local war.

I asked Norman to come with me on the old ketch *Fiona*, and in his reply he said how sorry he was – 'down to my heart's blood' – that he was too busy in an equally engrossing project that kept him in Texas. Now, in place of that trip, all I can do is to offer him inadequate thanks. A poor substitute.

Next to Sherry's *Eastern World* I am particularly beholden to Jocelyn Baines's superb *Joseph Conrad* and to his *Letters* so expertly edited by Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies, as well as Zdzislaw Najder's *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*. I am also grateful for the miscellaneous writings of G. J. Resink of Jakarta and The Hague.

I spent a good deal of time in the National Archives of Singapore and I have to thank Mrs Lily Tan, the enthusiastic lady in charge, for her help in tracing the past in a city where the past is not always held in the highest esteem. I am equally grateful to the directors of the National Archives in Bangkok where, thank heavens, the past is seldom forgotten, and where I also received much assistance from ladies and gentlemen of the Siam Society and the Neilson-Hays Library.

In Jakarta I was lucky enough to meet Dr Jacob Vredenbregt, who knows southern Celebes – the Bugis lands – well after five years' teaching at the University of Makassar, and my way through the region of the Makassar Strait was made a good deal more enjoyable by the cheerful Master of the PELNI steamer *Tidar*, Captain Harry Subardi. Indeed all the officers of PELNI were extraordinarily helpful, starting with Captain Abrahams of the *Lawit* who took me through the Bangka Strait.

To Mr Richard Bull, until recently Headmaster of Rugby, my thanks for all his great hospitality when I revisited my old school. And Graeme Laird and Willem van den Wall Bake gave me much appreciated house space in Bangkok and Jakarta respectively, waiting with exemplary patience for me to complete my research.

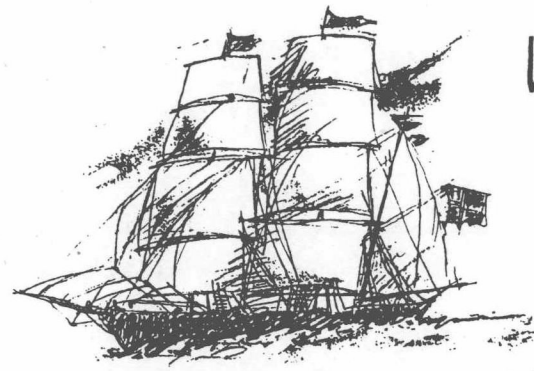
Boundless thanks are due, as always, to my 'sea anchor' Gritta Weil, and to Sheila Colton, who has considerable personal knowledge of the area of Conrad's South-East Asia and whose Malay is so much better than mine. Salim has excelled even himself with his drawings. Roddy Bloomfield, of course, remains one of the world's most sympathetic editors.

From the Oxford Companion to English Literature:

CONRAD, Joseph (Teodor Josef Konrad Korzeniowski) (1857–1924), novelist and short story writer, was born of Polish parents in the Russian-dominated Ukraine. His father's political sympathies caused the family to be exiled to Volagda in northern Russia, where Conrad's mother died when he was seven. After their return to Poland his father, a well-known patriot, poet, and translator of Shakespeare and Victor Hugo, also died and Conrad was taken under the wing of his uncle, Thaddeus Bobrowski, who was to be a continuing influence on his life. From an early age he longed to go to sea and in 1874 he went to Marseilles, embarked on a French vessel, and began the career as a sailor which was to supply so much material for his writing. In 1886 he became a British subject and a master mariner and in 1894, after twenty years at sea, he settled in England and devoted himself to writing. He published his first novel at the age of 38, writing in English, his third language.

In 1895 Conrad married Jessie George, by whom he was to have two sons, and his novel Almayer's Folly *appeared in the same year. This was followed by* An Outcast of the Islands *(1896). With* The Nigger of the Narcissus *(1897) and* Lord Jim *(1900) he showed himself a master of his craft. The sea continued to supply the setting for most of his novels and short stories. His narrative technique is characterised by a skilful use of breaks in time-sequence and he uses a narrator, Marlow, who provides a commentary on the action not unlike that of a Greek chorus. Conrad has been called an Impressionist and the movement of the stories, of the images and emotions, are portrayed through each character's private vision of reality. It was the novel* Chance *(1913) that brought Conrad his first popular and financial success. His other major works include* Youth *(1902),* The Mirror of the Sea *(1906),* Victory *(1915),* The Shadow Line *(1917),* The Rescue *(1920), and* The Rover *(1923). Conrad's autobiography,* A Personal Record *appeared in book form in 1912 and his unfinished novel* Suspense *was published in 1925.*

He died of a heart attack on 3 August 1924, at Oswalds, Bishopsbourne, near Canterbury, and was buried at St Thomas's Roman Catholic Church there.



Introduction

My obsession with Joseph Conrad got into its stride, as I explain later on, after my Headmaster read a passage from the story *Youth* – a story that said in so many words, 'Catch life on the wing – but hurry!' A message I took in at full strength.

Conrad was not entirely new to me. My grandmother had a shelf full of the complete novels and stories at her house in Cornwall, blue volumes with tantalising titles in gold: I particularly remember *Victory* and a book with a fascinating name, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. And the day my father died, about ten years ago, I found on his bedside table a battered copy of *The Mirror of the Sea* which from an inscription I saw he had bought at the Savoy Hotel in London in the middle of the war. Passing through London in the Blitz, and spotting it in that unlikely place, he had, I suppose, decided to carry it with him as a talisman for the rest of the war – and then, having done so, kept it by him for the rest of his life.

As a war correspondent I, too, took to carrying a Conrad novel about with me, both as a talisman and as a reminder that my hectic life was probably on the right track – that is, the one *Youth* had pointed out to me. Conrad had taught me that there was really no question of choice when a romantically inclined young man is faced with adventure and life on the one hand and a battened-down existence on the other.

My first job as a war reporter took me to the Congo and Katanga, the scene of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and subsequently to pleasanter places than that doom-laden centre of Africa that had done for poor horror-stricken Kurtz. Several of those places I went to had been well known to Conrad – places like Bangkok, Borneo and Singapore, all three settings for his novels and stories. In those places I

began in my mind's eye to 'see' the world of the novels; it wasn't difficult to see through their modern disguise. I began to feel I was surrounded by almost palpable spectres from *Lord Jim*, *Victory* and *Falk* whenever I was in Singapore or Bangkok – I would catch the flick of Marlow's nautical jacket or a whiff of his cheroot, or get a glimpse of Captain Whalley's bushy whiskers on Singapore's sunlit Esplanade, and hear the rattle of the horse-tramway down Bangkok's New Road passing Schomberg's hotel. From a steamer's deck a white sail, veiled by a rain squall, slipped between two islands in the Java Sea, and what ship could it be but Lingard's *Flash* or the *Rajah Laut*?

The more I thought about them, the more characters like William Lingard, Jim, Schomberg the innkeeper, the miserable Almayer and the rest of them seemed to be there, lounging in wait for me under a seafront awning or in the porticoed doorway of Emmerson's tiffin room. They became as real as actual Singaporeans or Thais passing me in the street.

Until my reporting career came to an end I never had time to go chasing after them. But one can only cover wars for so long without sickening of the whole business of death, destruction and refugees, and only then did I find time to fulfil the ambition to follow full-time in Conrad's steps. That was quite a tall order because the world does not stand still. Was I too late? These days, places change very quickly.

With Conrad's books open before me, I could see how skilfully he had laid a fresh layer of history on the places he had written about. Certain rivers he knew – particularly the Berau – are still relatively unknown. One or two Conrad scholars have been to the Berau, but not, as far as I know, for some time. The admirable Norman Sherry wanted to go there. It wasn't his fault that he did most of his research in the middle of the war of confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia and so found the islands inaccessible to him. My account of them, however inadequate, may therefore be the last. Soon the grave of 'Almayer's' sons may be devoured anew by the jungle, and the tombstones at Bulungan may very well disappear.

And the change was not all one way. Conrad, in a passage stating his extreme admiration for James Brooke, the first White Rajah of Sarawak, wrote:

> there were others – obscure adventurers who had not [Brooke's] advantages of birth, position, and intelligence; who had only his sympathy with the people of forests and sea he understood and loved so well. They can not be said to be forgotten since they have not been known at all. They were lost in the common crowd of seamen-traders of the Archipelago.

Such a one, *par excellence*, was William Lingard ('Tom Lingard' in the novels), 'a man once so well known, and now so completely forgotten amongst those charming and heartless shores'.

Men like him, said Conrad,

> for the few who know, have tinged with romance the region of shallow waters and forest-clad islands that lie far east and still mysterious between the deep waters of two oceans.

Of course Conrad himself, more than anyone, has changed the region, 'tinging it with romance' for ever. The East will never be the same since he wrote about it and fictionalised the real world of Olmeijer, Lingard, the Bugis and Syed Abdullah.

Some of the places they haunted still take some getting to. Norman Sherry's wonderful work of literary detection, *Conrad's Eastern World*, had told me that the grave of Austin Williams, the 'original' of Jim, might still be found in an abandoned graveyard. It can be found there still, but for how much longer? Of course national archives, registries, libraries remain full of records of people and events of a hundred years ago – of the world in which Conrad and his characters moved. But a grave is something personal.

Of all these elements I have tried to make an appetising *pot au feu*. I have often used bits of Conrad's own dialogue, and occasionally his own descriptions of people and places. I wanted to avoid a lot of imitation nineteenth century sailors' jargon, and after all, Conrad knew how his contemporaries spoke better than I do.

I must warn readers familiar with Conrad's works that now and again they may be startled to recognise the Master's own voice in the pages that follow. The truth is that I am attempting a kind of collaboration with the dead writer – his Past, my Present – without his permission, alas, but with the greatest reverence. Before I am accused of crass plagiarism, I should like to make that clear.

What follows is a pilgrimage – a search for scenes and ghosts known to that heavily accented foreigner from Eastern Europe, whose English shipmates nicknamed him 'Polish Joe' and who became one of the greatest novelists in the English language. I hope I can attract others to his world; to entice others to venture among the echoes and flickering shadows of the past, and among the swashbuckling ghosts, some evil, some noble, of strong men Conrad knew and made as familiar to us as if we had encountered them in real life.

Eager to meet them, I packed my old metal suitcase with the works of Joseph Conrad, and set off to the East.

Dramatis Personae

Abdullah, Syed

Conrad's fictional representation (as Abdulla) of the real Syed Abdullah Al Joofree. Wrested commercial control of the Berau and Bulungan rivers from Lingard and Almayer.

AL JOOFREE, Syed ABDULLAH

Eldest son of Syed Mohsin bin Salleh Al Joofree, Straits Arab merchant and owner of steamers, including the *Vidar* on which Joseph Conrad served as First Officer on four voyages to the Berau in 1887–8. Syed Abdullah was his father's agent in the Berau-Bulungan area and broke William Lingard's monopoly of the Berau trade.

Almayer, Kaspar

Fictional character based closely on Charles Olmeijer. In *An Outcast of the Islands* and *Almayer's Folly.* In the latter novel he dies worn out and a failure on the Berau.

Falk, Christian

Fictional tug master – 'the only tug master in Bangkok', according to Conrad – in the short story *Falk.*

Jim

Fictional character loosely based on A. P. Williams.

LINGARD, Captain WILLIAM

Nicknamed 'Rajah Laut' (King of the Sea) by admiring Malay sailors. A generous, daring, successful privateer and owner-captain of a succession of Singapore-based sailing ships, successfully trading throughout the Eastern Archipelago. Discovered and commercially exploited the Berau and Bulungan rivers in east Borneo – Charles Olmeijer was his representative there. Finally lost his trading monopoly on the Berau to Syed Abdullah Al Joofree, son of Syed Mohsin, the Singapore Arab trader and steamer-owner. His end was mysterious. Probably he returned to England and died there, but where and when is not known.

Lingard, Captain Tom

Fictional character based very closely on William Lingard.

Marlow, Captain

Joseph Conrad's *alter ego* in *Lord Jim.*

OLMEIJER, CHARLES

Born in Surabaya in 1848. Eurasian bookkeeper in Makassar, employed by William Lingard to represent him in the Berau office of Lingard & Co. for thirty years. Retired to Surabaya where he died after a cancer operation in 1900.

Schomberg, Wilhelm

Fictional innkeeper; a Conrad invention in *Lord Jim* and *Victory.*

WILLIAMS, A. P.

First officer (1880) of pilgrim-ship *Jeddah* at the time of her abandonment, blamed by the official inquiry as 'unfitted for his position as First Mate'. Returned to Singapore in disgrace. Died in Singapore on 17 April 1916.

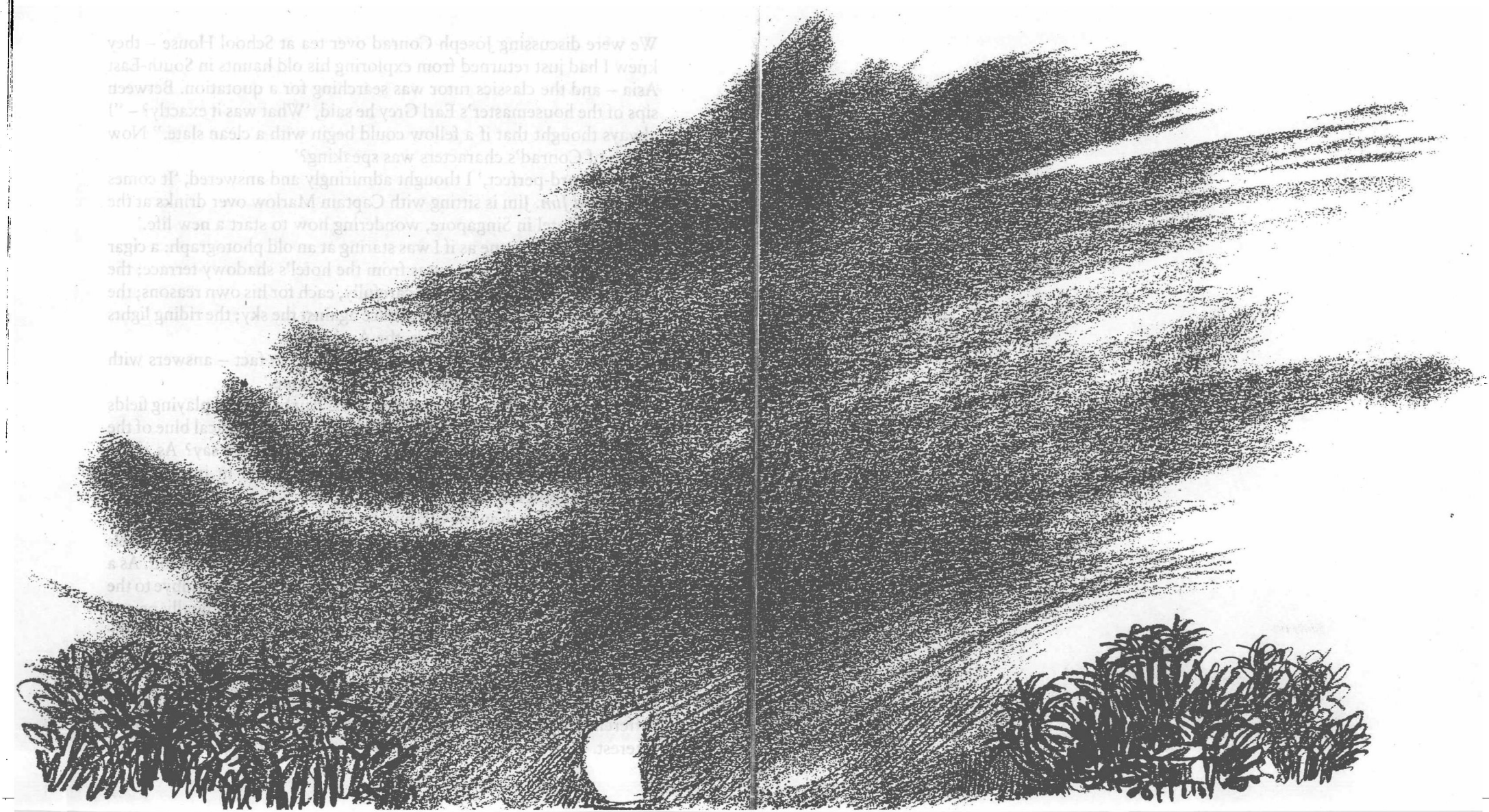
'A man has got to learn everything – that's what so many of these youngsters don't understand.'

'Well I am no longer a youngster.'

'No,' he conceded.

JOSEPH CONRAD, *The Shadow-Line*

Prelude



We were discussing Joseph Conrad over tea at School House – they knew I had just returned from exploring his old haunts in South-East Asia – and the classics tutor was searching for a quotation. Between sips of the housemaster's Earl Grey he said, 'What was it exactly? – "I always thought that if a fellow could begin with a clean slate." Now which of Conrad's characters was speaking?'

'He's word-perfect,' I thought admiringly and answered, 'It comes from *Lord Jim*. Jim is sitting with Captain Marlow over drinks at the Malabar Hotel in Singapore, wondering how to start a new life.'

I could see the scene as if I was staring at an old photograph: a cigar butt arcing like a shooting star from the hotel's shadowy terrace; the two men choosing their words carefully, each for his own reasons; the black shoulder of the Harbour Office against the sky; the riding lights of sailing ships and steamers in the Anchorage.

'That's right! And Marlow – well, Conrad in fact – answers with something about one's fate being hewn in stone.'

My eye followed a jetliner far above the Rugby School playing fields as it ruled a straight white line through the pale, untropical blue of the Warwickshire sky. I quoted, ' "A clean slate, did he say? As if the initial word of each our destiny were not graven in imperishable characters upon the face of a rock." '

It sounded like showing off, but it wasn't much of a feat of memory. I have lost count of the times I have read and re-read Conrad's novels about the East, and that book in particular was vivid in my mind. As a matter of fact, it was a mere three weeks since I had said goodbye to the obscure river in Indonesian Borneo where Marlow had finally parted from Jim – Jim, silhouetted all in white on a strip of sand against the black and sombre wall of coastline behind him, the western horizon 'one great blaze of gold and crimson'.

I had just come back from that river, that coast, that sunset. How different from the scene I was contemplating now. I looked at it with interest. The Close was sharply lit by an unclouded sky and the

housemaster's tall drawing room windows looked directly on to it. I had not stared at that view for forty years yet it was almost shockingly familiar. For a weekend in Shakespeare's mid-England I could hardly have chosen better weather. Sunlight flooded into the angles of the old drawing room, making its yellow walls glow like honey, and washed gently over the flat greenness beyond, over the boyish figures in white and the square white sightscreens over the darker background of tall, straight poplars and the needle-like spire of the Tolly Church. Nothing like the violent Eastern sunshine and the stronger vibrant colours I had come to know.

> I saw a bay, a wide bay, smooth as glass and polished like ice, shimmering in the dark . . . a puff of wind, faint and tepid and laden with strange odours of blossoms, of aromatic wood – the first sigh of the East on my face . . . .

I too had seen such bays; I had anchored and swum in them.

There were nine of us in the drawing room: the housemaster of School House, two of his tutors, five of his senior boys and myself. Across the Close a bowler ran with loping strides towards the wicket and the breeze brought us the faint click of a bat.

'See any changes?' The Senior Tutor was a clean-shaven, rather military-looking man, and of course as he asked I realised that what I had thought was familiar was in fact almost but not quite the same. Yes: the oak tree on the right of the garden wall had grown. And something else.Of course! – the static water tank had gone. No one

had ever had to put that dirty water to its intended use, which was to douse German incendiary bombs. Night after night in the early days of the Second World War the German bombers had throbbed above us on their way to pulverise Coventry, but although Rugby had an important railway junction I didn't recall any bombs falling – incendiary or otherwise. I remembered food rationing (meals of gristly mince), 'reconstituted' eggs, and bathwater limited to a few tepid inches. But no bombs. No 'enemy action'. No excitements at all. And then in our wartime backwater, one evening at Prayers the Headmaster had taken up his favourite anthology and read to us from Joseph Conrad.

In my day, our Headmaster took Prayers in Hall every weekday evening – one or two prayers, a hymn, a reading from his favourite anthology of uplifting poetry or prose: fifteen minutes of routine boredom. That evening began like any other. The boys sat at the long tables, all except a few senior boys who flanked the Headmaster on the dais under windows heavily masked by blackout curtains.

Prayers over, the single hymn ended, the Head of House carefully closed the lid of the upright piano and in the silence that followed the Headmaster rose with a book open in his hands. Murmuring, 'This is an extract from *Youth* by Joseph Conrad,' bowing a head haloed by strands of receding white hair, he began to read:

> I need not tell you, what it is to be knocking about in an open boat. I remember nights and days of calm, when we pulled, we pulled, and the boat seemed to stand still, as if bewitched within the circle of the sea horizon. I remember the heat, the deluge of rain-squalls that kept us baling for dear life (but filled our water-cask), and I remember sixteen hours on end with a mouth dry as a cinder and a steering-oar over the stern to keep my first command head on to a breaking sea. I did not know what a good man I was till then. I remember the drawn faces, the dejected figures of my two men, and I remember my youth and the feeling that will never come back any more – the feeling that I could last for ever, outlast the sea, the earth, and all men; the deceitful feeling that lures us on to joys, to perils, to love, to vain effort – to death; the triumphant conviction of strength, the heat of life in the handful of dust, the glow in the heart that with every year grows dim, grows cold, grows small, and expires, too soon, too soon – before life itself.

I was fifteen years old and the words rushed to my head like strong drink. Who was this unknown author telling us to wake up and start living? Telling us, in fact, just what we wanted to hear: that we were young (I am not sure that that fact had really struck us before) and, as Conrad put it, 'had closed behind us the little gate of mere boyishness,

and entered an enchanted garden'. Now, as I stood with my teacup in the sunlit window, the quiet voice of my late Headmaster reading those words came and went in my head like a distant but very distinct echo.

A cheerful, fair-haired boy – next term's Head of House – said to me politely, 'We hear you'll be reading some Conrad to us in Hall tomorrow. Some of us are taking Conrad for 'A' Levels, did you know?'

'I hope I won't put you off him,' I said.

I panned my mind's eye to that austere dining room-cum-auditorium like a movie camera – out of the elegant drawing room, across the carpeted hallway, through a self-closing door that led out of the Housemaster's private quarters into School House proper. I remembered a long, low passage lined by the gnarled wooden doors of boys' studies, cramped as cells of solitary confinement, and a steep corkscrew staircase that led down to great double doors, heavy and forbidding. Beyond these doors you were in Hall, an echoing, high-ceilinged, ancient, barnlike refectory. Here Dr Thomas Arnold, Rugby's early Victorian Headmaster, gowned and severely whiskered, had preached Muscular Christianity under the tall, ecclesiastical windows, looking sternly down at the long tables running the length of Hall, past the old black fireplace where the bully Flashman and his friends had roasted Tom Brown.

A Billy Bunterish boy in glasses blinked up at me. 'We're doing *Heart of Darkness* this term. What are you going to read to us?'

'Something from *Youth*,' I said.

How had I come to be here? Had I made an embarrassing mistake?

A few months earlier I had dared to write to the present housemaster of School House, explaining that I had spent some considerable time searching for traces of Conrad in the ports and on the waters of Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia – the countries Conrad had known as a ship's officer a hundred years ago. I explained how, at Prayers in Hall forty years ago, my obsession with Conrad had begun, that I hadn't been back to Rugby since, and that now at last I wanted to revisit that never-to-be-forgotten scene. To my surprise he had replied at once, 'Do come,' adding, as a *quid pro quo* – 'And by the way, because that passage from *Youth* had so much effect on *you*, would you be so kind as to read it to us?' The result was I was now apologising nervously to the little group of tea-drinkers in his drawing room.

'I promise to keep it short – actually the extract *is* short. I know those benches in Hall, how bloody hard they are.' I was relieved when they laughed.

The reading was to take place the following evening. Before my ordeal I revisited the chapel. Someone was practising on the organ; glittering arpeggios soaring up above a lectern in the form of a black eagle with gold-painted legs, beak and collar, scowling, earthbound, at the rows of empty pews. The words 'Thomas Arnold' were carved into a flagstone at its feet. I found a memorial to my Headmaster, a distinguished-looking plaque handsomely edged in gold. It told me that he had died aged ninety-three in 1986, that he had won an MC in the First World War, that he had been a poet (I hadn't suspected that) and a scholar.

Of course, there was no memorial to Joseph Conrad. Had there been one, I could imagine the sort of wording on it beneath an elaborate representation of an anchor –

To the memory of
Joseph Conrad (Josef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski),
Writer and Master Mariner
Born at Berdichev, the Ukraine, 3rd December 1857
Died near Canterbury, Kent, 3rd August 1924.

Or something like that. If it had been left to me I might have added a quotation from Psalm 107: 'So He bringeth them to the haven where they would be.' But Conrad, the agnostic, chose for himself a better epitaph from Spenser:

Sleep after toyle, port after stormie seas,
Ease after warre, death after life, does greatly please

I sat in my old seat in the choir stalls, craning my neck at the strange black and white beams in the ceiling while the unseen organist switched from majestic Handelian chords to something more nimble: probably Bach.

I had read Conrad's account of his childhood – orphaned before he was twelve and brought up by his Uncle Thaddeus Bobrowski and by tutors in Cracow and Lwow. Would that solitary, melancholy child have envied me my dim, draughty little study in School House? While his father lay dying next door, the child Conrad 'inked himself all over', alone in a large, sad drawing room, hunched over his books 'in a little oasis of light made by two candles in a desert of dusk'. Alone; but

mercifully he was a reading boy: 'I don't know what would have become of me if I had not been.'

Romantic books in Polish and French, capable of opening escape hatches to adventure on land and sea, lay everywhere – on consoles, on tables, even on the floor. 'I read! What did I not read?' Captain Marryat's sea stories; novels by Fenimore Cooper; Victor Hugo's *Toilers of the Sea*; and the Wild West fiction of Captain Mayne Reid, whose *Headless Horseman*, translated into Russian, was popular about then. Mungo Park's and David Livingstone's explorations in Africa and Sir Leopold McClintock's *Voyage of the Fox in the Arctic Seas* led the solitary boy to a feverish scrutiny of geography books and maps. At twelve years old, he jabbed a grubby, stubby finger down onto the blank middle of Africa – then truly the heart of darkness – and announced that one day he would go *there*! And sure enough, 'about eighteen years afterwards, a wretched little stern-wheel steamboat I commanded lay moored to the bank of an African river.'

Conrad's immediate way of escape was self-exile in France: coasting, gun-running and gambling in and around Marseilles. There was plenty of adventure there. Then came his unlikely arrival at the English port of Lowestoft, in the British ship *Mavis*, aged twenty, knowing no one and barely able to utter six words of English. Dumped on a jetty with a cargo of Turkish linseed on 18 June 1878, could this dreamy young foreigner with his pale, high-cheekboned face, broad shoulders, long arms, exaggerated gestures, and an accent as gruff as a

grizzly bear, nicknamed 'Polish Joe' by his British shipmates – could this be a future master of English literature?

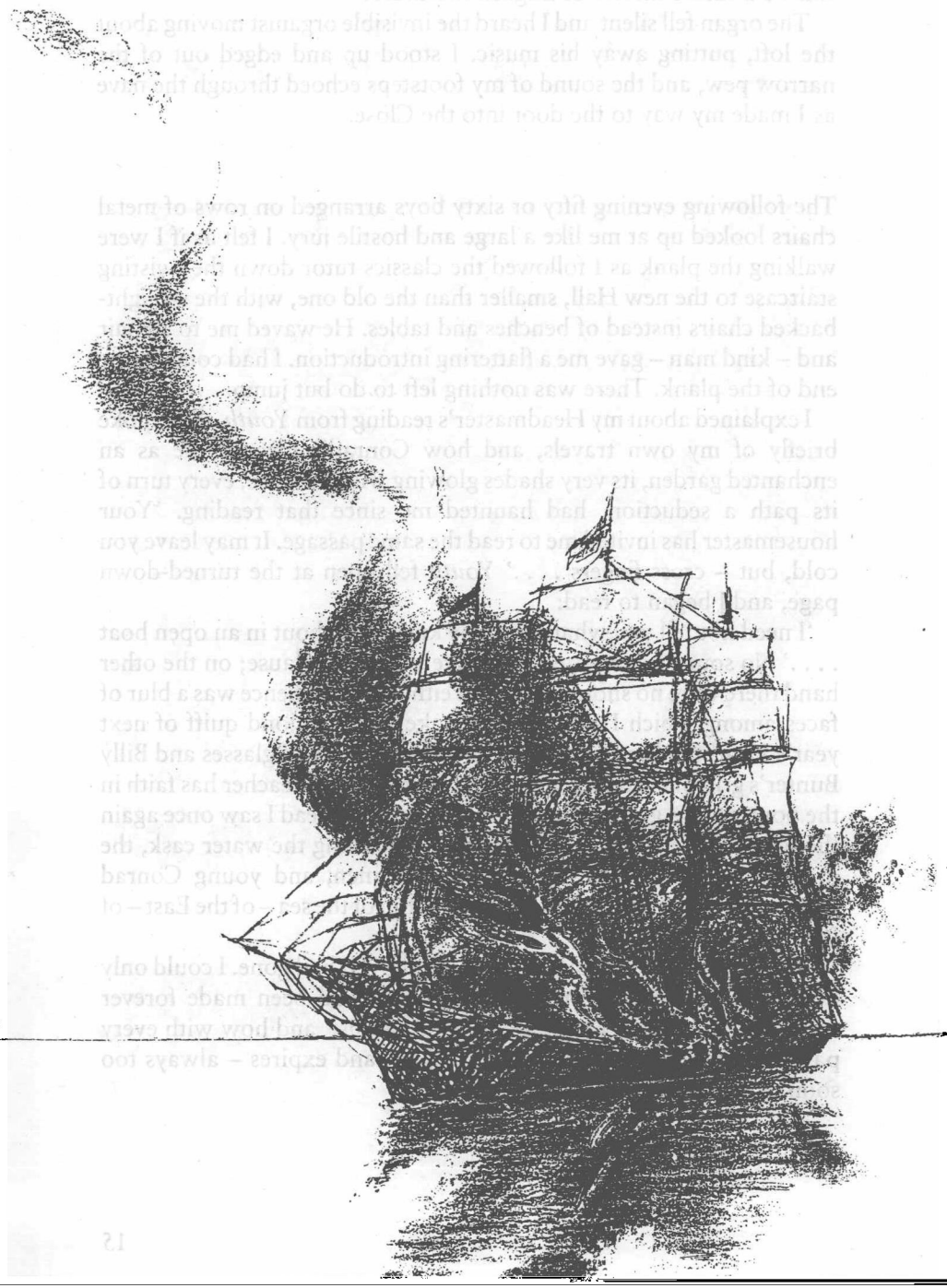
The organ fell silent and I heard the invisible organist moving about the loft, putting away his music. I stood up and edged out of the narrow pew, and the sound of my footsteps echoed through the nave as I made my way to the door into the Close.

The following evening fifty or sixty boys arranged on rows of metal chairs looked up at me like a large and hostile jury. I felt as if I were walking the plank as I followed the classics tutor down the twisting staircase to the new Hall, smaller than the old one, with the straight-backed chairs instead of benches and tables. He waved me to a chair and – kind man – gave me a flattering introduction. I had come to the end of the plank. There was nothing left to do but jump.

I explained about my Headmaster's reading from *Youth*, then spoke briefly of my own travels, and how Conrad's idea of life as an enchanted garden, its very shades glowing with promise, every turn of its path a seduction, had haunted me since that reading. 'Your housemaster has invited me to read the same passage. It may leave you cold, but – cross fingers . . . .' *Youth* fell open at the turned-down page, and I began to read:

'I need not tell you what it is to be knocking about in an open boat . . . .' No sound interrupted me; there was no applause; on the other hand there were no snores or giggles either. My audience was a blur of faces among which I could dimly make out the blond quiff of next year's Head of House, and now and again a flash of glasses and Billy Bunter's grin of encouragement. For the rest, as a preacher has faith in the power of his god, I had faith in Conrad. As I read I saw once again the boat motionless on the water, the rain filling the water cask, the drenched and dejected figures of the seamen, and young Conrad exulting in this initiation into the fellowship of the sea – of the East – of Life.

When I stopped reading I had no idea how it had gone. I could only hope that *someone* in my young audience had been made forever aware of the 'heat of life in the handful of dust' and how with every passing year it grows dimmer and colder, and expires – always too soon. And often long before life itself.



Part One

Youth

Let a young man voyage, speculate, see all that he can, do all that he may; his soul has as many lives as a cat; he will live in all weathers, and never be a halfpenny the worse.

It is as natural and as right for a young man to be imprudent and exaggerated, to live in swoops and circles . . . as it is for old men to turn grey, or mothers to love their offspring, or heroes to die for something worthier than their lives.

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

You doubt that the Divine Spark is within you. In this, you are like the others. Will you differ from them in faith which fans the spark into a brilliant fire?. . . .

Why are you afraid? Of what? Is it solitude or death? O strange fear! The only two things that make life bearable!

JOSEPH CONRAD
Letters to Marguerite Poradowska

Early in March 1883, the old British barque Palestine *(Captain Beard, First Officer Mahon, Second Officer Conrad Korzeniowski) entered the Sunda Strait, approaching Java Head. She had taken her time, having set sail from Newcastle-upon-Tyne as long ago as 29 November 1881 with 557 tons of West Hartley coal bound for Bangkok and a crew of thirteen hands all told. There had been mishaps on the way. At Newcastle the* Palestine *had been rammed by a steamer and delayed for three weeks. Beset in the chops of the English Channel by a succession of heavy gales, she lost sail and sprang a leak that almost did for her and shattered the nerves of her crew. She was delayed for thorough repairs in Falmouth for almost nine months. This was time enough for Conrad to receive (and ignore) a letter of advice from Uncle Thaddeus, his guardian, in Poland:*

> *Dear boy . . . such a wretched ship. If you succeed in drowning yourself it won't profit you to arrive in the Valley of Jehosophat in the rank of a third or second officer! . . . Both your Captain Beard and you strike me as desperate men, who go out of their way to see knocks and wounds. I shall not come down on you if you go back to London.*

Second Officer Korzeniowski did not go back to London. With him aboard, the Palestine *– the* Judaea *of* Youth *– creaked out to sea on her last voyage on 17 September 1882, and Conrad was destined to get his first sight of the East from an open boat.*

One

According to the schedule the *Lawit*'s sailing time from Tanjung Priok, the port of Jakarta, was 1600 hours. Just two hours to go.

I had arrived in plenty of time, obeying the advice on my ticket, allowing for traffic jams. It was just as well I had. In the passengers' waiting area on the wharf – a cement box with a high ceiling supported by square pillars – scores of men, women and children were confined within a plate glass inferno. I doubt if there was a square yard of empty floor-space. Standing, sitting, squatting, some lying full-length, propped against hillocks of bags, boxes and baskets of woven leaves, they chatted and laughed, ceaselessly offering each other small, thin cigarettes that filled the thick, humid air with sweet, clove-scented smoke.

I stood like a sweating zombie: loosely to attention, immobile, my feet imprisoned by elbows and knees, a zip bag on my shoulder, my grip in one hand and my ticket turning slowly to sweaty pulp between the fingers of the other. I felt like a man who has painted himself into the corner of a Turkish bath. If I stooped a little to peer through the locked plate glass doors I could see the steep side of a big ship, but it wasn't the *Lawit*; there was another name on her lifeboats. The *Lawit*, I supposed, was some way further along the wharf.

I caught my companion's eye and gave him a smile of encouragement. He winked mutely back. There was no point in my saying anything: he would not have understood. That was the snag. Waiting to board ship, my mind wrestled with the problem. What on earth was I going to do with him?

It had seemed such a good idea. 'Do take Tomi with you,' an Indonesian friend had said. 'His English is not bad and he does so want to improve it.' So, even though I much prefer travelling alone, I had

agreed to take him with me, sight unseen, as an interpreter. My knowledge of the Indonesian language – *bahasa Indonesia* – is minimal and I would be lucky, I thought, to find many people in Bangka Island who spoke English. So an interpreter would come in useful, and Tomi would be worth his fare. But meeting him for the first time in the taxi to the wharf I knew within two minutes that my Indonesian friend had been talking rubbish and that Tomi's English was non-existent. With 'yes' and 'thank you', Tomi just about reached the limit of his spoken English.

The knowledge came too late. For one thing, the tickets were bought, but for another – and far more importantly – it was obvious that Tomi was pathetically excited by the prospect of his first sea journey, so that when we reached Tanjung Priok passenger terminal I hadn't the heart to tell him to take the taxi back to the city and forget the whole thing. With a flurry of flamboyant mime (I could see the driver's startled eyes in the mirror), he had conveyed that he was a student at a Jakarta school for ballet dancers. Confirmation followed in a remarkable fistful of Polaroids. At what looked like a particularly lively private party, he and his friends were shown doing spectacular high kicks in tights or, with wide smiles, posing coyly for the flashlight. 'Very nice, Tomi,' I had said, and he had murmured 'Shank you'.

So there he was, tall, slim and muscular, clutching an elegant new shoulder bag, in new white shoes, black and white sports shirt and jeans, waiting patiently to embark for Muntok.

With a roar of static, the port's loudspeaker began to bellow. For me, catching one word in twenty, it might have been announcing a bomb in the waiting room. Since Tomi could do nothing to enlighten me it was a relief to see policemen unlocking the glass doors. Barely waiting for them to open, several hundred passengers exploded, yelling, on to the wharf, heading in a jostling mob towards our ship's bows glimpsed vaguely at the far end of it. We followed more slowly, myself gloomily, Tomi with the straight-backed dignity of the prince in *Swan Lake*.

He could not keep that up for long. Our boarding was anything but dignified. A human scrum fought for footholds on the *Lawit*'s extremely steep and overcrowded gangway. In the ruck at its foot policemen strode importantly up and down, blowing whistles and shouting fiercely, '*Dua! Dua!*' ('Two-by-two! Two-by-two!'). Paying no attention, we pressed forward in fives and sixes, battered and bumped by other people's baggage, clutched at by other people's hands, toes squashed by countless stumbling feet. Near the top of the

gangway, Tomi's bag staggered me with a hefty clout from behind that buckled my knees and I had a fleeting vision of my swift descent to the quayside, sweeping a dozen passengers with me in a mêlée of arms, legs, sarongs, parasols and large cardboard boxes. '*Hati-hati!*' I snapped over my shoulder – 'Careful!' – and heard Tomi's apologetic murmur. Sweating and dishevelled, a few steps later I handed our tickets to a ship's officer in an impeccable white uniform with two shining gold bars on his shoulderboards.

'Deck Number 7. Take key from information office.' he said, smiling sleepily, his English almost as impeccable as his uniform. I didn't need an interpreter at all. I collected the cabin key and followed a steward to the cabin. There, dumping my bags on one bunk, I pointed Tomi to the other. I showed him the shower, the washbasin and toilet and he murmured 'Hot-and-cold' with a smile.

I splashed cold water on my face. 'I'll be back,' I said, and went out and up on to the boat deck. People with baggage bustled about. Indonesian pop music, much amplified, rose from a deck or two below. The ship had come alive. I wanted to look her over and watch her take to the sea. She was the first Indonesian vessel I had ever been on.

The *Lawit* was relatively small – a neat 1400 tons, perhaps – but modern and German-built and belonging to the Indonesian government's shipping company, PELNI. I liked the look of her. She was clean and freshly painted; her officers and crew looked neat and businesslike. In due course she hooted three times to signal our departure, and several hundred other passengers rushed up from her bowels to see what would happen. A tug, the *Selat Sanding*, nosed close to our stern, and fat, muscular men in oily denims wrestled our stern cable on to the great hook on her deck. A second tug moved to our bows; another cable splashed down and was made fast. Silently, infinitely slowly, we were eased out parallel to the quayside, inching with seamanly caution away from a Thai ship lying astern of us, the *Bua Thip* of Bangkok, loading or offloading scrap – and looking like a lump of scrap herself from the rust on her.

The Indonesian passengers watched all this intently, standing three-deep at the *Lawit*'s rails. All ages, sexes and sizes, they were determined to get a view of the harbour, laughing and shouting, elbowing and shouldering. Soon they began pointing and coyly winking at me, the only *orang putih* (white man) aboard, evidently regarding me as an unusual bonus to their sea-going adventure.