Chapter 1

Conrad's life

Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski was born in Berdyczów in a predominantly Polish part of Ukraine on December 3, 1857 to Apollo Korzeniowski and his wife Ewelina Bobrowska. Conrad's parents were of the *szlachta*, the Polish gentry. At the time of Conrad's birth, Poland had been partitioned among Prussia, Russia, and Austria-Hungary for over sixty years. Apollo Korzeniowski was a writer and a man passionately committed to Polish independence. He played a prominent role in the revolutionary activities of the early 1860s, for which he was arrested and convicted of seditious actions. In 1862, Korzeniowski was sentenced to exile and sent to Vologda, Russia, and then later to Chernikhov. He was accompanied by his wife and young son, and the family suffered greatly during their exile. As a result of the poor conditions, Conrad's parents both contracted tuberculosis, and his mother died in April 1865. This was a solitary time in Conrad's life, as the boy spent most of his time in the sole company of his father. Korzeniowski remained in exile until early 1868 when he was allowed to leave in order to aid in Conrad's recovery from an illness. This was a better time for them, but Korzeniowski's tuberculosis soon worsened, and he died in May of 1869, leaving Conrad an orphan. Korzeniowski was given a hero's burial and is still considered a national hero in Poland.

Conrad's experience with his father during their time together very much influenced his later years. His devotion to literature, interest in revolutionary politics, attitudes about Russia, skeptical view of the world, and sometimes adventurous spirit all probably have some origin in his experience with his father. After his father's death, Conrad was cared for by family and friends, particularly Tadeusz Bobrowski, his maternal uncle, who became a second father to Conrad. Unlike the fiery and idealistic Korzeniowski, Bobrowski was conservative, careful, practical, and ultimately disapproving of Korzeniowski's approach to the world. Over the years, Bobrowski exerted a strong influence on Conrad and his attitudes, so Conrad's character seems to have been very much affected by both his father and his uncle.

As early as 1872, Conrad expressed a desire to pursue a life at sea. This was an unusual career choice for a Polish boy, and Conrad was certainly influenced in his choice by his reading of such authors as Cooper and Marryat. In 1874, Bobrowski finally agreed to allow Conrad to move to Marseilles, France, to pursue his maritime training. Thus at age seventeen, Conrad in effect left Poland for good. In Marseilles, Conrad studied his trade, and his uncle supported him with a generous allowance, but as Bobrowski's letters attest, Conrad was irresponsible with money, and although Bobrowski always rescued Conrad from his youthful irresponsibility, he constantly upbraided him for such failings.

In July of 1876, Conrad served as a steward aboard the *Saint Antoine*, which traveled to the Carribean and the Americas, and this represents Conrad's only experience in the new world. It would prove to be the basis for his most panoramic novel, *Nostromo*. Later, in early 1878, Conrad apparently went through a good deal of money, may have been involved in a romantic encounter (possibly with the model for Doña Rita of *The Arrow of Gold*), and may have been involved in some smuggling activity. What occurred after this time is not entirely clear, but, according to Bobrowski's letters, it appears that Conrad attempted suicide. The event remains obscure because at the time and in later years Conrad claimed to have been wounded in a duel.

During these years, the issue of Conrad's citizenship became increasingly important. Bobrowski agreed to allow Conrad to go to Marseilles not only because of Conrad's desire to pursue a life at sea, but because, as a result of his father's revolutionary activities, Conrad was subject to lengthy conscription in the Russian army. Bobrowski thought that by moving to France, Conrad could become naturalized in another country more easily. Because France required a valid passport to work in the French Merchant Marine Service, however, and because Russia refused to issue such a passport to Conrad, it became clear that Conrad would not be free from military obligations to Russia if he remained in France. Consequently, Bobrowski encouraged Conrad to seek naturalization elsewhere. Thus, Conrad eventually joined the British Merchant Marine service, despite speaking no English at that time.

Over the next few years, Conrad sailed on several English ships, and in 1880 he studied to become an officer, passed his examination, and shortly thereafter became third mate aboard the *Loch Etive*. Wishing to move up the professional ladder, Conrad went in search of a position as second mate, finally obtaining one aboard the *Palestine* in November 1881. His experience aboard the *Palestine* was to become the raw material for one of his most important short stories, "Youth." A good deal of Conrad's experience aboard the *Palestine*

resembles the events chronicled in "Youth," including the lengthy repairs before finally setting out, the ship catching fire, their experience in life boats, and Conrad's first close-up view of the exotic East.

Conrad continued to ply his trade, and in 1884 found himself ashore in Bombay, India, where he accepted a position as second mate aboard the *Narcissus*. His experience was to form the basis for his first great novel *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."* Upon arriving in England again, Conrad had completed the required time to qualify for the first officer examination. After some initial difficulty, he eventually passed the examination. However, positions were scarce, and, unable to obtain a position as first officer, despite his new certificate, Conrad finally accepted one as second officer aboard the *Tilkhurst* in April 1885. In 1886, Conrad took the examination for a master's certificate, which would qualify him to serve as captain, but failed one section. In July, Conrad applied for British naturalization and was formally accepted on August 18, and later that year Conrad again took the master's examination, this time passing it. In 1887, Conrad shipped out of Singapore as first mate aboard the *Vidar*, which stopped in various ports throughout the Malay Archipelago. Conrad's time aboard the *Vidar* was his first opportunity to experience the East for an extended period of time, and the experience would become valuable material for much of his fiction about the East. In January 1888, Conrad left the *Vidar* and shortly thereafter received his first and only command when he was appointed captain of the *Otago*. This experience would provide the basis for much of Conrad's fiction, particularly *The Shadow-Line*, "Falk," "A Smile of Fortune," and "The Secret Sharer." The *Otago* was based out of Australia, and during his time in command, Conrad traveled to Port Louis, Mauritius, as well as to various ports along the Australian coast. In March 1889, Conrad decided to give up command of the *Otago*. The reasons for this decision have remained a mystery. He may have been averse to living in the East on a relatively permanent basis, or he may have harbored thoughts of eventually pursuing a career on land in England. Shortly afterwards, a significant change occurred in Conrad's life: he began to write his first novel, *Almayer's Folly* – in English. He could have written in Polish or French, but chose English instead.

Having been unsuccessful in finding a berth bound for the East, Conrad began looking for a command in Africa. He went to Brussels and met Albert Thys, the director of the *Société Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo*, about the possibility of commanding a steamboat on the Congo River. While there, Conrad met a distant relative, Aleksander Poradowski, and his wife, Marguerite. Poradowski died only days after Conrad met him, but the visit was fortuitous in that Conrad and Marguerite became close friends. Shortly

before leaving for the Congo, Conrad made his first trip home to Poland in sixteen years. With experiences so different from those he encountered, Conrad was uncomfortable and must have recognized how little he had in common by then with his compatriots.

In May 1890, Conrad set off on one of the most important voyages of his life when he traveled to the Congo to accept his post. His experience would be recorded in part in his "Congo Diary," but it would also become the basis for "An Outpost of Progress" and his most widely known tale "Heart of Darkness." He arrived on the Congo River in June and began his journey up river, proceeding from Bowa to Matadi. During his stay, he became friendly with Roger Casement, who later became famous when he exposed the atrocities occurring in the Belgian Congo. Despite the colonial enterprise being depicted in Europe as a humanitarian endeavor, Conrad found a great deal of greed, waste, and chaos. In early August, Conrad arrived in Kinshasa intent on taking command of the steamboat *Florida*. The *Florida*, however, had been damaged, and Conrad instead had to travel up river on the *Roi des Belges*, under the command of another captain. They arrived at Stanley Falls (now Kisangani) at the beginning of September and shortly thereafter headed back to Kinshasa. Conrad was asked to take over command of the *Roi des Belges* temporarily while the captain was ill, and the few days he acted as substitute captain constitute Conrad's only command in Africa. The return voyage carried a sick agent, George Antoine Klein, who died on route. Klein became one of the models for Kurtz in "Heart of Darkness." During the next several months, Conrad traveled throughout the Congo on company business and appears to have suffered a good deal from ill health, so much so that he was eventually invalided home, arriving back in Europe at the end of January 1891. Conrad's experience in the Congo had an enormous impact on him. Despite its relative brevity, it would affect him for the rest of his life and as much as anything else influenced his outlook on civilization and human existence itself. His criticism of the abuses and disorder he witnessed was unrelenting, as evidenced in his various writings on the subject.

After returning from the Congo, Conrad spent some months recovering his physical and psychological health. In November of 1891, he accepted a first mate position aboard the *Torrens*, which regularly sailed between England and Australia. On a return trip from Australia in March 1893, Conrad met Edward Lancelot Sanderson and John Galsworthy, who would become Conrad's life-long friends. Both would also become literary figures, Galsworthy an important novelist and playwright, and Sanderson a minor poet. In July, the *Torrens* arrived in England, and Conrad decided to resign his position and take an extended trip to Poland. By late 1893, he was back in

England and looking for work. He signed on to the steamer *Adowa* in late November and sailed to Rouen, France, intending to carry passengers to Canada, but the trip never materialized, and so in January the *Adowa* returned to London. Although he didn't know it at the time, when Conrad disembarked he left his life at sea behind him for ever. The next month, another dramatic change occurred in Conrad's life when Tadeusz Bobrowski died, leaving a spiritual void in Conrad's life. Despite their different temperaments, Bobrowski's influence on Conrad had been unmistakable, and Conrad keenly felt his uncle's loss.

Although Conrad continued to look for work at sea, he was unsuccessful and was already beginning his journey toward a new life. Throughout the first half of 1894, he worked to finish *Almayer's Folly*, which he sent to T. Fisher Unwin in early July. Then in August, Conrad began what he thought would be a short story entitled "Two Vagabonds," but, as was to happen frequently in his career, the story evolved into a full-length novel, *An Outcast of the Islands*. In early October, Unwin agreed to publish *Almayer's Folly* and Conrad officially began his literary career. The acceptance of *Almayer's Folly* also brought Conrad in touch with one of his most important literary contacts: Edward Garnett. Garnett was one of Unwin's readers and had recommended the book to him. Conrad soon developed a close friendship with Garnett, and much of his most interesting correspondence is with Garnett. More important than the personal friendship, however, was Garnett's eye for good literature, and he became an invaluable sounding board for Conrad's future writings, as well as being instrumental in introducing Conrad to a number of important people.

Almayer's Folly took longer to write than most of Conrad's other works, but he seemed to suffer from none of the emotional stress and depression that would so mark his literary career. As early as *An Outcast of the Islands*, though, Conrad was beset with self doubt and depression about his work, and, as would prove to be the case almost invariably, Conrad struggled mightily with its writing. While Conrad was still wrestling with *An Outcast of the Islands*, *Almayer's Folly* appeared in print in early 1895. The reviews were generally positive, and Conrad was pleased, but despite the positive reviews, the book did not sell well. His experience with *Almayer's Folly* would be one with which he would soon become familiar. For nearly the first twenty years of his writing career, reviews of Conrad's books generally would be overwhelmingly favorable, but his books would not sell. This cycle of agonized writing, followed by positive reception, followed by poor sales would contribute to Conrad's constant problems with health and finances. Conrad finished *An Outcast of the Islands* in September of 1895, and shortly after

completing it began a third novel, entitled *The Sisters*. He worked on it for several months, sending part of the manuscript to Garnett for evaluation. Based on Garnett's comments and on his own opinion, Conrad eventually abandoned the project around March of 1896.

About this time a significant change occurred in Conrad's life. Little is known regarding his courtship of Jessie George, a typist, whom he appears to have met perhaps as early as 1894. Jessie came from humble origins, but apparently, as they worked together, an intimacy evolved. All that can be said for certain is that their relationship developed quickly, and by March 24, 1896 Conrad was a married man. Conrad's choice of Jessie has puzzled many. Coming from such different backgrounds, the pair would seem to have been ill suited for one another. Apparently, Conrad did not even find Jessie particularly attractive. Nevertheless, despite their differences, their marriage appears to have been reasonably successful. Perhaps only someone of Jesse's temperament could have dealt with someone of Conrad's temperament. In any case, their marriage worked out better than most probably would have predicted. The couple honeymooned in Brittany, during which time Conrad wrote the short story "The Idiots." Having abandoned *The Sisters*, Conrad turned his attention to what would become his most difficult novel project: *The Rescuer* (later titled *The Rescue*). Begun in 1896, the novel was some twenty-three years in its completion.

While struggling with *The Rescuer*, Conrad continued to work on other projects. During this time, he wrote perhaps the best of his early stories, "An Outpost of Progress." Conrad also wrote "The Lagoon" and probably began work on *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."* Reviews of *An Outcast of the Islands* also began to come out about this time, and, like those of *Almayer's Folly*, they were generally favorable. As it turns out, one of the reviewers was H. G. Wells, with whom Conrad corresponded. This resulted in a friendship that lasted for a number of years before they had a falling out.

Conrad's poor management of money became a problem once again as he lost a good deal of his inheritance from Bobrowski through speculative investing. This situation would be the beginning of the constant financial difficulties that would beset Conrad for at least the next fifteen years. Conrad and Jesse returned to England in September and settled into their new life. Conrad soon began working in earnest on *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* one of the few novels over which he did not seem to struggle. He finished it in January of 1897; it was to be Conrad's first literary masterpiece and the one which would initiate his most productive literary period. In February, Conrad made another important literary friendship, this time with Henry James. Conrad thought James to be the greatest living novelist, and in turn

James appreciated Conrad's work. Around this time, Conrad also began writing "Karain," which he thought would be easy and bring in some money if placed in a good magazine. The story turned out to be more difficult than he expected, and Garnett's advice and help placing the story were invaluable, particularly since the story was eventually published in *Blackwood's Magazine*, one of the premier magazines of the day. Whilst writing "Karain," Conrad began work on "The Return." This long story cost Conrad considerable effort but was one of his more disappointing efforts. It was one of only two stories that Conrad was never able to place in a magazine.

In August 1897, an important and interesting acquaintance entered Conrad's life. After reading "An Outpost of Progress," R. B. Cunninghame Graham wrote to Conrad expressing his admiration for the story. Graham remained a friend to Conrad for the rest of Conrad's life. In some ways similar and in some ways different, the two made an interesting pair. Graham was a swashbuckling figure and descended from the Scottish aristocracy. Some of Conrad's most significant letters were written to Graham, and Graham was a useful sounding board for Conrad's political and literary views. Conrad seems to have been able to be more direct with Graham than he was with others, and Conrad's view of the world and his pervasive skepticism are particularly pronounced in many of his letters to him.

During the summer of 1897, Conrad wrote his most important statement of aesthetic theory when he composed a preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."* About this time, Conrad was introduced to Stephen Crane, who had been impressed with *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* and wanted to meet Conrad. The two developed a strong friendship that was cut short by Crane's untimely death. Conrad genuinely appreciated much of what Crane wrote and certainly appreciated his warm friendship. Throughout this time, *The Rescue* hung over Conrad's head. Although still intending to complete the novel, he made little headway. Meanwhile, *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* appeared in book form in early December and was Conrad's most successful book to that point, receiving even more favorable reviews than had his previous novels. Unfortunately, once again, praise did not translate into significant sales, and Conrad's financial situation grew steadily worse.

In January of 1898, Conrad's first son, Borys, was born. Though slow to take to the idea of fatherhood, Conrad eventually developed a warm relationship with both of his sons. In March, he published his first story collection entitled *Tales of Unrest*, which contained "Karain," "The Idiots," "An Outpost of Progress," "The Return," and "The Lagoon." Although *The Rescue* was supposed to be Conrad's primary focus at this time, he continued to work on other projects. It was during this time that Conrad wrote "Youth."

The story first introduces Conrad's readers to his most famous character, Charlie Marlow. Marlow narrates "Youth," as he does "Heart of Darkness" and *Lord Jim* shortly thereafter. Many years later, Marlow would take his curtain call as narrator of *Chance*.

Conrad's financial situation continued to deteriorate, both because of his inability to finish *The Rescue* and because of his habit of living beyond his means. In October, Conrad moved to Pent Farm in Kent, renting a cottage from Ford Madox Ford (Hueffer), to whom Garnett had introduced him. Although Conrad had closer long-term friendships and longer literary relationships, none were probably as important to his development as a writer as was his relationship with Ford. The two writers even collaborated on three projects: *The Inheritors*, *Romance*, and *The Nature of the Crime*. Their theories about literature and literary techniques tended to rub off on one another, and for many years the two were close friends. Ford probably got more out of this literary relationship than did Conrad, but it would be wrong to assume that Conrad learned nothing from Ford.

Probably around June of 1898, Conrad began working on *Lord Jim*, which he had assumed would be a short story. In the fall, he began working on the piece in earnest, and in December, while working on *Lord Jim*, Conrad began "Heart of Darkness," which later appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine*. Compared to his usual experience, Conrad had little trouble writing "Heart of Darkness" and in a relatively short time produced one of his finest works. In January, Conrad received a prize from the literary weekly *Academy* for *Tales of Unrest*. Despite his increased critical acclaim, however, Conrad's financial circumstances were no better.

In February, the publishers dropped plans to bring out *The Rescue*, and Conrad was relieved of a weighty burden. In the meantime, he continued to work on *Lord Jim*. Around this time, Conrad unknowingly became embroiled in a painful episode. Wincenty Lutosławski, having met Conrad some time earlier, wrote an article entitled "The Emigration of Talent," in which he either misunderstood or misrepresented Conrad to be an example of an ex-patriot Pole who chose to write in English rather than Polish because of the greater financial possibilities. The article resulted in Eliza Orzeszkowa's scathing attack on Conrad, in which she accused him of selling out and betraying Poland. When Conrad learned of this exchange he was both hurt and angered. This would not be the only time that Conrad would be made to feel that he had betrayed Poland by leaving his homeland. Conrad was particularly sensitive to such criticism and probably did feel some guilt over having left.

Meanwhile, the first installment of *Lord Jim* appeared in the October issue of *Blackwood's Magazine*. At various points, Conrad thought the novel was

nearing its conclusion, but each time he would be wrong. At this time, he was working almost exclusively on the novel, but he did break away on occasion to collaborate with Ford on *The Inheritors*. As with all of their collaborative works, although Conrad made significant contributions, for the most part the work represents Ford's ideas, work, and writing. Also in October, the Second Boer War had broken out, and Conrad first revealed his extreme skepticism toward politics. Although he felt an allegiance toward his adopted country, he was, at the same time, extremely suspicious of politics and jingoism.

In the meantime, Conrad continued to experience difficulties writing *Lord Jim*, while financial and health troubles also plagued him. Nevertheless, he made good progress on the novel. During this time, Crane's illness took a turn for the worse, and Conrad saw him for the last time in May, shortly before Crane died. Crane was a good friend to Conrad, and Conrad's affection for Crane's memory never wavered.

The next month would bring an end to *Lord Jim* and to the novel that many believe to be his greatest. After finally finishing *Lord Jim*, Conrad next began working with Ford on a collaborative novel entitled *Seraphina* (later *Romance*). About this time, Conrad accepted an offer from James B. Pinker to act as Conrad's literary agent. This arrangement relieved Conrad of the trouble of finding places in which to publish his work and also provided him with a more regular income. Although their relationship was at times volatile, Pinker was a great supporter of Conrad and made his life easier. In late 1900, *Lord Jim* appeared in book form, and again reviews were quite positive. However, as the novel was the first work that fully implemented Conrad's narrative experimentations, reviewers also expressed a good deal of confusion. Strong praise of the novel from Henry James, though, greatly pleased Conrad. Again, sales were modest, and Conrad's financial difficulties continued. By September, Conrad had begun his next important story, "Typhoon," which he finished in January of 1901. He then began work on "Falk," the only story besides "The Return" that he was unable to publish in serial form. Unlike "The Return," whose difficulty may have been its quality, the difficulty with "Falk" appears to have been its subject material, in which cannibalism appears prominently. The story was finished in April, and, like "The Return," eventually found its way into a collection of stories.

With "Falk" completed, Conrad and Ford began working in greater earnest on *Romance* and Conrad continued to work on his own writings, composing "Amy Foster" during part of May and June of 1901. In June, while Conrad and Ford were working on *Romance*, *The Inheritors* was published. *The Inheritors* did not sell well and, unlike Conrad's own books, it was not very

favorably reviewed, either. Conrad and Ford worked on *Romance* through the summer and fall of 1901. In the fall, Conrad also began his story "To-morrow," which he finished in February 1902. Early in 1902, Conrad and Ford were still working on *Romance*. Unfortunately, they were unable to get it serialized, at which point Conrad turned his attention to "The End of the Tether."

In the midst of deep financial difficulties, Conrad experienced yet another set back when part of the manuscript for "The End of the Tether" was burned when a lamp exploded. In July, though, Conrad received some good news in the form of a grant from the Royal Literary Society, which helped to alleviate some of his financial difficulties. The next few months were spent primarily in completing "The End of the Tether." In November, Conrad and Ford again took up *Romance*, and at the same time "*Youth*" *and Two Other Stories* (which included "Youth," "Heart of Darkness," and "The End of the Tether") appeared to somewhat more mixed reviews. However, the book sold a little better than his previous books. November also brought the beginning of Conrad's next important work: *Nostromo*. Unlike Conrad's previous writings, which were drawn largely from personal experience, *Nostromo* came almost exclusively from Conrad's imagination and his reading. The novel would grow and grow, and much of Conrad's writing in 1903 was spent on it.

In April, "*Typhoon*" *and Other Stories* (containing "Typhoon," "Amy Foster," "Falk," and "To-morrow") appeared and was well received, and in September, Conrad was forced to set aside *Nostromo* in order to complete the final work on *Romance*, which was finally published in October. The novel's reception was not particularly good, and it did not bring the authors the popularity they desired. Conrad then returned to *Nostromo*, finding the task incredibly difficult and often a cause of bouts of illness and depression. In January 1904, *Nostromo* began to be serialized, and in the same month Conrad also began writing some non-fiction sketches of his life at sea. Eventually, these would become part of *The Mirror of the Sea*. Shortly thereafter, while still working on *Nostromo*, Conrad began writing a stage version of "To-morrow," entitled *One More Day*.

The difficult work on *Nostromo* continued, while Conrad also wrote more sketches for *The Mirror of the Sea*. This latter book seems to have emerged in part at Ford's instigation and perhaps also through Ford's help in that Ford apparently made suggestions, asked questions, and generally helped in the book's construction. Meanwhile, Conrad's financial difficulties continued, but William Rothenstein, a well-known portrait painter, had become friendly with Conrad and helped to arrange for a loan that greatly helped the situation. Finally, at the end of August, Conrad finished *Nostromo*. Given