

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-56163-1 - Notes on Life and Letters  
Joseph Conrad Edited by J. H. Stape  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

NOTES ON  
LIFE AND LETTERS

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-56163-1 - Notes on Life and Letters  
Joseph Conrad Edited by J. H. Stape  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I DON'T KNOW WHETHER I ought to offer an apology for this collection which has more to do with Life than with Letters. Its appeal is made to orderly minds. This, to be frank about it, is a process of tidying up which from the nature of things can not be regarded as premature. The fact is that I wanted to do it myself because of a feeling that had nothing to do with the considerations of worthiness or unworthiness of the small (but unbroken) pieces collected within the covers of this volume. Of course it may be said that I might have taken up a broom and used it without saying anything about it. That certainly is one way of tidying up. 5

But it would have been too much to have expected me to treat all this matter as removable rubbish. All those things had a place in my life. Whether any of them deserve to have been picked up and ranged on the shelf – this shelf – I can not say, and, frankly, I have not allowed my mind to dwell on the question. I was afraid of thinking myself into a mood that would hurt my feelings; for those pieces of writing, whatever may be the comment on their display, appertain to the character of the man. 15

And so here they are, dusted, which was but a decent thing to do, but in no way polished, extending from the year '98 to the year '20, a thin array (for such a stretch of time) of really innocent attitudes: Conrad literary, Conrad political, Conrad reminiscent, Conrad controversial. Well yes! A one-man show – or is it merely the show of one man? 20

The only thing that will not be found amongst those Figures and Things that have passed away, will be Conrad “en pantoufles.” It is a constitutional inability. Schlafrock und Pantoffeln! Not that! Never! . . . I don't know whether I dare boast like a certain South American general who used to say that no emergency of war or peace had ever found him “with his boots off”; but I may say that whenever the various periodicals mentioned in this book, called on me to come out and blow the trumpet of personal opinions or strike the pensive lute that speaks of the past, I always tried to pull 25

my boots on first. I didn't want to do it, God knows! Their Editors, to whom I beg to offer my thanks here, made me perform mainly by kindness but partly by bribery. Well yes! Bribery? What can you expect? I never pretended to be better than the people in the next street or even in the same street.

This volume (including these embarrassed introductory remarks) is as near as I will ever come to déshabillé in public; and perhaps it will do something to help towards a better vision of the man, if it gives no more than a partial view of a piece of his back, a little dusty (after the process of tidying up), a little bowed, and receding from the world not because of weariness or misanthropy but for other reasons that can not be helped: because the leaves fall, the water flows, the clock ticks with that horrid, pitiless solemnity which you must have observed in the ticking in the hall clock at home. For reasons like that. Yes! It recedes. And this was the chance to afford one more view of it – even to my own eyes.

The section within this volume called Letters explains itself though I do not pretend to say that it justifies its own existence. It claims nothing in its defence except the right of speech which I believe belongs to everybody outside a Trappist monastery. The part I have ventured, for shortness' sake, to call Life, may perhaps justify itself by the emotional sincerity of the feelings to which the various papers included under that head owe their origin. And as they relate to events of which everyone has a date they are in the nature of sign-posts pointing out the direction my thoughts were compelled to take at the various cross-roads. If anybody detects any sort of consistency in the choice, this will be only proof positive that wisdom had nothing to do with it. Whether right or wrong, instinct alone is invariable; a fact which only adds a deeper shade to its inherent mystery. The appearance of intellectuality those pieces may present at first sight is merely the result of the arrangement of words. The logic that may be found there is only the logic of the language. But I need not labour the point. There will be plenty of people sagacious enough to perceive the absence of all wisdom from those pages. But I believe sufficiently in human sympathies to imagine that very few will question their sincerity. Whatever delusions I may have suffered from I have had no delusions as to the nature of the facts commented on here. I may have misjudged their import but that is the sort of error for which one may expect a certain amount of toleration.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

5

The only paper of this collection which has never been published before is the Note on the Polish Problem. It was written at the request of a friend to be shown privately, and its "Protectorate" idea sprung from a strong sense of the critical nature of the situation was shaped by the actual circumstances of the time. The time was about a month before the entrance of Roumania into the war, and though, honestly, I had seen already the shadow of coming events I could not permit my misgivings to enter into and destroy the structure of my plan. I still believe that there was some sense in it. It may certainly be charged with the appearance of lack of faith and it lays itself open to the throwing of many stones; but my object was practical and I had to consider warily the preconceived notions of the people to whom it was implicitly addressed and also their unjustifiable hopes. They were unjustifiable, but who was to tell them that? I mean who was wise enough and convincing enough to show them the inanity of their mental attitude? The whole atmosphere was poisoned with visions that were not so much false as simply impossible. They were also the result of vague and unconfessed fears, and that made their strength. For myself, with a very definite dread in my heart, I was careful not to allude to their character because I did not want the Note to be thrown away unread. And then I had to remember that the impossible has sometimes the trick of coming to pass to the confusion of minds and often to the crushing of hearts.

Of the other papers I have nothing special to say. They are what they are, and I am by now too hardened a sinner to feel ashamed of insignificant indiscretions. And as to their appearance in this form I claim that indulgence to which all sinners against themselves are entitled.

J. C. 30

1920.

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-56163-1 - Notes on Life and Letters  
Joseph Conrad Edited by J. H. Stape  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-56163-1 - Notes on Life and Letters  
Joseph Conrad Edited by J. H. Stape  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

PART I  
LETTERS

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-56163-1 - Notes on Life and Letters  
Joseph Conrad Edited by J. H. Stape  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---



## BOOKS

### 1905

#### I

“I HAVE not read this author’s books, and if I have read them  
 I have forgotten what they were about.” 5

These words are reported as having been uttered in our midst  
 not a hundred years ago, publicly, from the seat of justice, by a  
 civic magistrate. The words of our municipal rulers have a solemnity  
 and importance far above the words of other mortals, because  
 our municipal rulers more than any other variety of our governors 10  
 and masters represent the average wisdom, temperament, sense,  
 and virtue of the community. This generalisation, it ought to be  
 promptly said in the interests of eternal justice (and recent friend-  
 ship), does not apply to the United States of America. There, if  
 one may believe the long and helpless indignations of their daily 15  
 and weekly Press, the majority of municipal rulers appear to be  
 thieves of a particularly irrepressible sort. But this by the way. My  
 concern is with a statement issuing from the average temperament  
 and the average wisdom of a great and wealthy community, and  
 uttered by a civic magistrate obviously without fear and without 20  
 reproach.

I confess I am pleased with his temper, which is that of prudence.  
 “I have not read the books,” he says, and immediately he adds, “and  
 if I have read them I have forgotten.” This is excellent caution.  
 And I like his style; it is unartificial and bears the stamp of manly 25  
 sincerity. As a reported piece of prose this declaration is easy to  
 read and not difficult to believe. Many books have not been read;  
 still more have been forgotten. As a piece of civic oratory this  
 declaration is strikingly effective. Calculated to fall in with the bent  
 of the popular mind, so familiar with all the forms of forgetfulness, 30  
 it has also the power to stir up a subtle emotion while it starts a train  
 of thought – and what greater force can be expected from human  
 speech? But it is in naturalness that this declaration is perfectly  
 delightful, for there is nothing more natural than for a grave City

Father to forget what the books he has read once – long ago – in his giddy youth maybe – were about.

And the books in question are novels, or, at any rate, were written as novels. I proceed thus cautiously (following my illustrious  
5 example) because being without fear and desiring to remain as far as possible without reproach, I confess at once that I have not read them.

I have not; and of the million persons or more who are said to have read them, I never met one yet with the talent of lucid  
10 exposition sufficiently developed to give me a connected account of what they are about. But they are books, part and parcel of humanity, and as such, in their ever-increasing, jostling multitude, they are worthy of regard, admiration, and compassion.

Especially of compassion. It has been said a long time ago that  
15 books have their fate. They have; and it is very much like the destiny of men. They share with us the great incertitude of ignominy or glory – of severe justice and senseless persecution – of calumny and misunderstanding – the shame of undeserved success. Of all the inanimate objects, of all men's creations, books are the near-  
20 est to us, for they contain our very thought, our ambitions, our indignations, our illusions, our fidelity to truth, and our persistent leaning towards error. But most of all they resemble us in their precarious hold on life. A bridge constructed according to the rules of the art of bridge-building is certain of a long, hon-  
25 ourable, and useful career. But a book as good in its way as the bridge may perish obscurely on the very day of its birth. The art of their creators is not sufficient to give them more than a moment of life. Of the books born from the restlessness, the inspiration, and the vanity of human mind those that the Muses would love  
30 best lie more than all others under the menace of an early death. Sometimes their defects will save them. Sometimes a book fair to see, may – to use a lofty expression – have no individual soul. Obviously a book of that sort cannot die. It can only crumble into dust. But the best of books drawing sustenance from the sympathy and  
35 memory of men have lived on the brink of destruction, for men's memories are short, and their sympathy is, we must admit, a very fluctuating, unprincipled emotion.

No secret of eternal life for our books can be found amongst the formulas of art, any more than for our bodies in a prescribed  
40 combination of drugs. This is not because some books are not worthy