

## CHAPTER I

*Early Conrad Commentary*

## CRITICISM TILL 1930

This first period of Conrad commentary was dominated by two critical traditions: biographical/historical criticism and belles lettres criticism. Reviewers and other commentators particularly relate Conrad's literature to his unique personal experiences and often compare him to contemporaneous writers of sea fiction such as Louis Becke, Frank Bullen, W. W. Jacobs, and Pierre Loti, and to such writers of adventure fiction as Alexandre Dumas and Robert Louis Stevenson. Early on, critics recognized aspects of Conrad's works that would become consistent points of interest, particularly his style, atmosphere, characterization, narrative methodology, descriptive abilities, and psychological investigations. Before the first book on Conrad appeared in 1914, commentary was limited to the many reviews of individual works and the small number of articles that considered his biography or overall writing career. Although all of these are of historical interest (as the few general commentaries on Conrad of that time), only a small number were truly insightful.

Conrad commentary began with the first review of *Almayer's Folly*, which appeared in *The Scotsman* on April 29, 1895, the day the book was published. In "New Novels," the anonymous reviewer calls the book "remarkable" and praises Conrad's descriptive powers and the unity of effect that colors the book with pathos. This review, in its appreciation of Conrad's abilities, resembles so many others to appear during his career. The first article on Conrad's works, however, is an unsigned 1896 column in *The Bookman*, "New Writers: Mr. Joseph Conrad." This short biographical piece rehearses generally accurate information and notes the exotic atmosphere of Conrad's first two novels. A similar unsigned article, "New Writer: Joseph Conrad," also appeared in *The Bookman* in 1901 and contains a more detailed biography of Conrad.

While *The Bookman* articles emphasize Conrad's biography, Hugh Clifford's unsigned 1898 review of Conrad's first four books for *The Singapore Free Press* focuses on Conrad's works. A writer and longtime British official in Malaysia, Clifford praises Conrad's style and powerful descriptions. He is particularly impressed with Conrad's literary maturity even in *Almayer's Folly*, let alone in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."* This article is especially important because, despite his appreciation, Clifford strongly critiques Conrad's understanding of Malays, arguing that he in fact had no real understanding of them. Clifford's was the first word of caution concerning Conrad's exotic representations, which other reviewers had particularly praised. Initially, Conrad bristled at Clifford's criticism, but later the two became good friends. Around the same time, Conrad's friend and sometimes literary advisor Edward Garnett published an unsigned article, "Academy Portraits: Mr. Joseph Conrad" (1898), which ostensibly reviewed *Tales of Unrest* but actually commented on Conrad's work to date. Garnett argues that Conrad makes his readers see humanity in relation to the universe, both its seen and unseen forces. He also notes Conrad's ability to make the reader see the scenes he describes and argues that his is a higher order of realism. Clifford and Garnett were the first to assess Conrad's young career. Even more important, in "Our Awards for 1898: The 'Crowned' Books" (1899), *The Academy* awarded its annual prize to *Tales of Unrest* (named in conjunction with two other books). Rumored to have been written by author Arnold Bennett, this useful commentary especially notes Conrad's style, which is such that his art actually conceals itself. The author argues that in Conrad's works human beings exist in their place in nature and with full knowledge of their shortcomings, rather than appearing larger than nature. The author also suggests that Conrad's fiction bears similarities to Greek tragedies and that he has brought the East to the Western reader.

Along with his review in *The Singapore Free Press*, Clifford published three other early articles on Conrad: "The Art of Mr. Joseph Conrad" (1902), "The Genius of Mr. Joseph Conrad" (1904), and "A Sketch of Joseph Conrad" (1905). The first is ostensibly a review of *Youth and Two Other Stories*, but, as in his earlier article, Clifford considers Conrad's work generally. He particularly points to Conrad's literary technique and intellectual appeal, noting the need to reread his books to fully appreciate them. Clifford comments on Conrad's realism and ability to evoke the reality of his settings, whether they be the fogs of London, the salt spray aboard the *Narcissus*, or the stifling heat of the Malay forests. In "The Genius of Mr. Joseph Conrad," Clifford provides the first account of Conrad's life

and how it relates to his writings. He goes on to remark on Conrad's literary career through *Typhoon and Other Stories*, placing particular emphasis on the vividness and reality of his characters and settings. Clifford again notes Conrad's misunderstanding of Malays. Despite this shortcoming, Clifford feels that Conrad's Malay characters are successful because they appear as real people (just not real Malays). Clifford's "Joseph Conrad: A Sketch" is a brief piece, adding little to what he had already revealed in "The Genius of Mr. Joseph Conrad."

Other articles also appeared during this decade. W. H. L. Bell's "Joseph Conrad" (1903) notes Conrad's lack of a popular audience but recognizes his appeal to literary readers. Despite Conrad's superficial similarities to writers such as Maupassant, Bell contends that Conrad is unique because of his prose poetry and portrait of humanity at the mercy of greater forces. Also recognizing Conrad's uniqueness, an unsigned article, "Personalities: Joseph Conrad" (1904), argues that a singular personality appears in Conrad's works; the article also discusses Conrad's background and physical appearance. Influential American literary critic John Albert Macy, in "Joseph Conrad" (1906), focuses instead on Conrad's genius and sees him possessing two crucial elements that make a great novelist: his stylistic talents and his experience (particularly his sea experience). At the same time, Macy criticizes Conrad's narrative structure. He would have preferred conventionally well-written and stylistically superior adventure novels from Conrad and considers his narrative experimentation a major flaw. George Lancashire's "Joseph Conrad" (1907) surveys Conrad's career through *The Mirror of the Sea* and emphasizes his analysis of human nature's subtleties and contradictions, as well as Conrad's ability to make readers see atmosphere, scene, and setting, which Lancashire finds unique to Conrad's writings. He also feels, however, that Conrad's non-chronological narratives sometimes impair his works' value. Lancashire concludes that Conrad's tales (like life) lack finality but nevertheless convey the meaning of human existence.

In 1908, Conrad's longtime friend and fellow author John Galsworthy wrote "Joseph Conrad: A Disquisition" (1908), which assesses Conrad's career up through *The Secret Agent*. Galsworthy notes Conrad's exceptional style, his presentation of human beings as a small part of the universe rather than as its center, his ability to look at British society from outside, and his range of characters that extends across all levels of society (with limited upper-class representation).

More articles began to appear during the second decade of the twentieth century. One of the most important is friend, collaborator, and fellow

author Ford Madox Ford's "Joseph Conrad" (1911). As with similar commentaries, Ford ostensibly reviews *Under Western Eyes*, but his comments on the novel cover only a small portion of the article. Instead, he uses this review as an opportunity to elaborate on Conrad's works generally. He primarily seeks to defuse the label "foreigner" that so annoyed Conrad. Instead, Ford aligns him with the Elizabethan tragedians in his emphasis on tragedy tied to honor – Jim's honor, Whalley's honor, Falk's honor, and particularly Razumov's honor. Ford then connects Conrad's concept of honor to moral law, such that those who transgress the moral law suffer the consequences. He also links this idea to Conrad's sense of destiny in the modern world. Ford comments as well on Conrad's descriptive style, arguing that he insists a writer must never state what happens but rather represent it, and those descriptions Conrad does provide are never simply an end but rather a means toward thematic or other purposes. Like Ford, Edward F. Curran, in "A Master of Language" (1911), focuses on language, arguing (as do many others during this period) that Conrad is a master of language and a master of realism in his vivid descriptions. He also singles out Conrad as the only truly psychological writer, despite many others' claiming that title. Curran favors *Lord Jim* and *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* most and "The Return" least, and, although he admires *The Secret Agent*, he misses in it the unity and solidarity of so many of Conrad's works. That same year, Francis Grierson published "Joseph Conrad: An Appreciation." In this article, Grierson praises Conrad's literary talents and emphasizes his characterization of Wait in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* as well as his direct and dramatic descriptive abilities. A similarly titled article by Conrad's friend and fellow author Perceval Gibbon also appeared that year. Gibbon particularly appreciates *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* and comments favorably on Conrad's style and development of scene and setting. Gibbon also rehearses some of the background behind Conrad's works (gleaned from installments of *A Personal Record*). Overall, he sees Conrad as an artist who maintains literary standards, never stooping to write for expediency.

Stephen Reynolds, a budding writer and friend of Conrad's, also wrote an important early commentary. In "Joseph Conrad and Sea Fiction" (1912), Reynolds, like Ford, attempts to shift critical opinion away from Conrad's Polish heritage, which some had seen as the source for his unique fiction. Instead, he argues for an Englishness in Conrad's works, an Englishness whose source is Conrad's experience as an English sailor. Reynolds contends that Conrad's moral code and philosophy of life developed at sea are the true sources for his fiction; in particular, Conrad seeks

to reveal the fiber of his characters' being (or lack thereof). Reynolds also considers Conrad's critique of civilization elemental in nature rather than ideal: that is, Conrad does not look at how civilization ought to be and then show how individuals do not live up to the ideal; instead, he identifies certain elementary and fundamental qualities, which, if lacking, result in an empty civilization. Finally, Reynolds notes Conrad's realism, especially his ability to create humble characters, like Singleton, who exude greatness, without Conrad condescending toward them.

That same year, another friend of Conrad's, Richard Curle, published his first of many commentaries on Conrad. In "Joseph Conrad" (1912), Curle argues for a striking combination of romance and psychology permeating Conrad's works. He notes similarities between Conrad and Flaubert and Conrad and Turgenev but sees only superficial similarities between Conrad and Dostoevsky. Curle also notes Conrad's mournful philosophy and especially emphasizes the effect of atmosphere on his characters. In addition, he praises Conrad's vivid descriptions and particularly appreciates *Nostromo*. As is sometimes true of Curle's commentaries, this article is episodic, and, as he himself admits, he occasionally has difficulty putting into words exactly why he so admires Conrad's works. This article is historically important because through it Curle met Conrad and became his close friend and supporter.

Unlike Curle's emphasis on theme and influences, Frederic Taber Cooper's "Representative English Story Tellers: Joseph Conrad" (1912) focuses on form. Cooper rejects two common criticisms: that Conrad follows no logical narrative development and that his works lack proportion. Instead, Cooper views Conrad's narrative development as a spider weaving its web, producing a praiseworthy final form but whose method for arriving at that point zigzags, hesitates, crosses, and recrosses. Cooper also responds to complaints of the varying length of Conrad's works, arguing that no themes require one length rather than another. Neither theme nor topic determines length; instead, the approach determines the length. He especially admires Conrad stylistic originality and careful workmanship and considers "Typhoon," "Heart of Darkness," *Lord Jim*, and *Nostromo* to be his finest works. Although he believes Conrad is at home both at land and sea, Cooper feels his best work is on the sea and the waterfront. An astute American critic, Cooper was particularly influential on some of the early commentary that followed.

As do so many commentators of this time, Swedish-American literary critic Edwin Björkman, in "Joseph Conrad: A Master of Literary Color" (1912), praises Conrad's realism. Björkman suggests that to achieve this

realism, an artist must have discipline, sympathy, and insight, all of which Conrad possesses. In this regard, he notes Conrad's ability to evoke striking images, particularly his ability to evoke the sea and the tropics, where passions, languor, and life and death exist in close proximity. Regardless of locale, Conrad causes readers to experience settings as if they were first-hand experiences. His special abilities for rendering, however, lie in his characters, representing them in tragedy and farce with equal skill. Unlike Galsworthy, Björkman contends that for Conrad humanity is first and nature second. Despite Conrad's emphasis on humanity, Björkman argues that he does not advocate social or political issues. Social, political, philosophical, or religious programs are equally of no interest to Conrad. Rather, his interest lies in human beings mastering themselves.

James Huneker's "A Visit to Joseph Conrad: The Mirror of the Sea" (1912) is one of the first reminiscences of Conrad. Huneker recounts his visit to Conrad's home and remarks on his warmth and sympathy for things human. Huneker also notes Conrad's impatience with bad art. Of Conrad's works, he mentions their variety and emphasis on the human heart. Huneker's piece is primarily significant because a selection later appeared in the first stand-alone commentary on Conrad: a promotional pamphlet, *Joseph Conrad* (1913), which Alfred A. Knopf (then an employee of Doubleday, Page & Co.) compiled. Knopf was instrumental in the marketing and resulting commercial success of *Chance*. In addition to Huneker's contribution and other supplementary materials, the pamphlet includes Knopf's "Joseph Conrad: The Romance of His Life and of His Books," which chronicles Conrad's life and the history of his writings to date. That same year, the author of the unsigned *Bookman* article "Joseph Conrad" (1913) articulates what many reviewers had obliquely mentioned: Conrad's lack of popularity. The author laments the greater acceptance of so many lesser writers, lauding Conrad's invention and style, while noting that his popularity finally seemed to be increasing.

The following year, Huneker published a second article on Conrad: "The Genius of Joseph Conrad" (1914). Similar to Björkman, Huneker argues that Conrad (unlike many of his contemporaries) is uninterested in proving anything or promoting any social cause, but is instead a disinterested artist. He suggests that Conrad has taken sea fiction to a new level and discusses the role of Conrad's personal experience in his fiction. He also broaches Conrad's ability to use English, his ability to invent, his use of indirect narrative methodology, and how his novels are novels of ideas. Huneker concludes with one of the early discussions of women in Conrad's works, arguing that Conrad is not simply a man's author but

that women also read him, and although his male characters often receive more emphasis and are sometimes better drawn, many of his female characters are also well drawn and sympathetically portrayed.

Grace Isabel Colbron's "Joseph Conrad's Women" (1914) is a more extensive commentary on the subject and argues that men are the focus of Conrad's fiction, while women resemble his settings. They develop only insofar as they aid in developing male characters. Conrad's women are never complex and do not reason but instead react from instinct or impulse. Furthermore, they are typically inarticulate and seem alive only when silent (except for Nathalie Haldin). Colbron also argues that Conrad's best depictions of women, like that of Nina Almayer, occur when he draws women of passion (whether love, hate, or desire). She concludes that primitive womanhood, as in merging of Kurtz's African mistress and the Intended, is the one aspect of a woman's life that interests Conrad and brings out his best work. Although reviewers such as Elia W. Peattie had previously remarked on the subject, Colbron's essay is the first extended comment on Conrad's women.

A particularly important commentary is Henry James's "The Younger Generation" (1914). Sharply contrasting with so many others, James was one of the few who did not consider *Chance* to be a great work. He effectively argues that the novel's narrative complexity comes not from necessity of plot but rather is imposed from without. In short, James suggests that the novel's form takes precedence over its substance. Conrad was hurt by this article, but many later commentators have come to agree with James. On a different topic, H. W. Boynton, in "Joseph Conrad" (1914), argues that, unlike many of his contemporaries, Conrad does not pander to public tastes but produces literature. Boynton notes that much of Conrad's work emerges from his own experience, and he asserts that humanity's struggle against the universe especially interests Conrad. Conrad does not focus on nature as humanity's opponent but rather as the place to investigate the flaws of the human heart, and Boynton sees behind Conrad's gruff cynicism a passionate sympathy toward humanity. For Boynton, form and content cannot be separated in Conrad's works. In addition, chance plays a role in Conrad's writings, but unlike the mere coincidence of some writers, Conrad represents chance as a causal event.

In addition to reviews of Conrad's works and a handful of articles, a good number of pamphlets and book-length studies concerning Conrad's life and works appeared during his lifetime. The majority of these are either laudatory or introductory in nature. Most attract little attention from modern commentators, but a few still provide useful information; one



such work is Richard Curle's *Joseph Conrad: A Study* (1914). More broadly conceived than most contemporary commentaries, Curle's was the first extended discussion of Conrad's works, and he sees Conrad marking a new epoch in literary history. One of *Nostromo's* early proponents, Curle considers the novel a neglected masterpiece. Besides noting his appreciation (in the belles lettres tradition), he discusses many issues others would later investigate more extensively. For example, he argues that Conrad sees duty as the basis for his work as well as for human existence, and he contends that Conrad's philosophy links optimism toward humanity with pessimism toward life, Conrad's works exhibiting romance tinged with fatalism and sadness touched by compassion and simplicity. Curle particularly points to Conrad's ability to evoke atmosphere (which intertwines with mind). Coming in part from Conrad's own personality permeating his works, this atmosphere evolves (represented as more physical early in his career and more spiritual later) and impresses a concept in Conrad's mind onto the reader's mind. Curle comments as well on Conrad's use of psychology, especially the fixed ideas possessing some characters. These fixed ideas reveal Conrad's view of humanity: a world of darkness and unrest beneath the usual sanity and goodwill. As Conrad represents psychology, he strives for realism (as he does with the other aspects of his work), and this realism gives his characters their tragic dignity. As had Colbron, Curle discusses Conrad's male and female characters. He sees male characters as realistic portraits of individuals, masculine men who also have what Curle considers feminine qualities: pity, self-sacrifice, and unselfishness. He defends the female characters against the criticism that Conrad does not understand women and argues that Conrad's women exhibit a femininity that reveals their intuition and pity, alongside other positive qualities. For Curle, another hallmark of Conrad's fiction is his irony, the product of a melancholy disillusionment rather than a skeptical view of existence. This irony is not only a philosophic view but also an artistic means of presenting a picture or invoking an atmosphere. Furthermore, Curle suggests that Conrad's prose is essentially foreign, more exuberant early in his career, more subdued later. Curle concludes by classifying Conrad as one of the greatest romantic-realists, with Slavic and especially French literary origins; thus Conrad is best understood in a European rather than an English context alone. Although Conrad may have spoon-fed Curle many of his ideas, Curle does provide some good readings of individual works, and he influenced many who followed him.

While Curle's was the first book-length study of Conrad's works, American critic Wilson Follett's insightful *Joseph Conrad: A Short Study*



(1915) is the first to identify some of the most important issues in Conrad studies. Follett argues one must keep in mind a broad humanity and warmth of temperament tied to Conrad's art, with all his artistic endeavors focused solely on making clear the heart of truth. A tempered melancholy, a mood of seeking but not finding, lies beneath Conrad's fiction. For Follett, Conrad sees a basic irony in the relationship between humanity and the universe, but, in the face of moral negation and nothingness, humanity still matters, and because of Conrad's radical skepticism he can posit limitless faith in individuals. Even when defeated, humanity remains heroic because human will is more powerful than the impersonal forces aligned against it. The infinite mind of humanity constantly duels with the infinite world, every human hope or dream a positive gain wrestled from the universe's blank negation. Linked to Conrad's universe is the individual as social outcast. Follett was the first to investigate extensively Conrad's insistence on the need for solidarity. He notes Conrad's skepticism but argues for its affirmative rather than despairing effect. Follett also considers narrative technique, suggesting that the reader must work toward meaning, as narrative methodology merges with theme. In Conrad's disregard for chronology, supremacy of mood requires readjusting events, as in *Nostromo*, where the narrative becomes the chronology of an idea rather than of events. In addition to Conrad's world view and narrative technique, Follett also comments lucidly on various individual works, consistently identifying important issues. For instance, unlike previous writers of the sea, Conrad succeeds in representing complete sailors in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* because he succeeds in making them complete men. Follett sees the novel chronicling humanity's plight: confronting death and needing to connect with others to survive in an indifferent universe. In this way, Conrad investigates the contrast between isolation and solidarity. Similarly, Follett notes *Nostromo's* panoramic point of view and argues that the role of outcast (played by individuals in other works) is played by avarice: outcast from moral qualities, with material interests impeding human solidarity. Similarly, Follett sees the victory of *Victory* as Lena's: over herself and over Heyst and his paralyzing skepticism. In the end, Heyst yields to love and an associated spiritual triumph, turning from the enigma of nothingness toward the warmth of humanity. Of *Lord Jim*, Follett remarks that the irony of the novel's conclusion is Jim's atoning for failure not through success but through failure, and yet this failure becomes his triumph. Follett also comments on Marlow, whom he sees as an element of Conrad himself, allowing Conrad to converse with himself and examine

his subject. Marlow shows intimate sympathy based on intuition; he has self-knowledge, insight into human foibles, and is wholly practical. He (as is Conrad) is solidarity incarnate. Concerning Marlow's role in *Chance* in particular, Follett argues that the narrative brings the reader through successive layers, with the keenest eye farthest from the object. Follett's book has undeservedly fallen into relative obscurity, despite Conrad himself having been particularly pleased with it.

These extended studies were followed by Hugh Walpole's *Joseph Conrad* (1916), which is largely an appreciation of Conrad's works without extensive analysis, although Walpole does provide some commentary. A prolific novelist and friend of Conrad's, Walpole argues that Conrad's characters are often simple, unimaginative men, and he notes the frequency of characters with an *idée fixe*. Walpole also discusses Marlow and other first-person narrators, and, although he is not enthusiastic about Marlow, he applauds *Nostramo's* narrative methodology. Walpole views Conrad's early style as somewhat awkward, influenced by his knowledge of French and by nature itself. Later, however, his style became cool and clearheaded. For Walpole, Conrad's atmosphere intermingles with all of life, and Walpole sees him representing human beings as weak in a world aligned against them, but he also thinks that Conrad admires courage, simple faith, and obedience to duty in the face of such adversity. This work includes an early commentary on romantic and realist elements (a point upon which others would expand), suggesting that Conrad employs romantic elements realistically and that this realism allows his romance to succeed.

While the more extended and (in Follett's case) more important commentary on Conrad's works began to appear in books, essays of interest continued to be published. For example, Arthur Symons's lyric "Conrad" (1915) suggests that Conrad probes the human heart, representing neither villains wholly evil nor heroes wholly good. In so doing, he reaches into the comforting and bewildering realm of the unknown, ultimately displaying sympathy for humanity despite its flaws. A poet, critic, and sometimes correspondent with Conrad, Symons provides some analysis in this essay, but it is primarily written in the *belle lettres* tradition. In contrast, William Lyon Phelps's "The Advance of the English Novel: VIII" (1916) is a strong literary analysis. Unlike many commentators of the time, Phelps, an influential American author and critic, argues that Conrad's works are not romantic at all (which is partly responsible for their lack of popularity). Phelps admires Conrad's not pandering to the public and thus producing artistic work, of which he sees "Typhoon" and *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* as particularly fine examples. Phelps believes Conrad's