

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-07128-4 - Joseph Conrad: Times Remembered

John Conrad

Excerpt

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## Aldington days, 1909–10

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## I

The infant. Early recollections – pretending illness –  
the cure – the cottage – Mr and Mrs Post – playing  
on the bank – Mr Slingsby – the iron horse – cuts  
and bruises – clean and tidy for meals

When my parents left 'The Someries', near Luton in Bedfordshire, it was to return to Kent, to a tiny cottage at the bottom of Ruffins Hill at Aldington. It was a dark and gloomy place rendered more so by the dark paint which seemed to be the usual colour for dwellings at that time. Add to this the fact that it was built on the north side of an abrupt hill which effectively cut off any sunlight from early autumn to late spring, and one had all the ingredients for a thoroughly depressing abode. It was primitive in the extreme: water from a well outside the back door, a bucket in a shed at the end of the garden as a toilet, and fires that produced more smoke than heat, hardly created the atmosphere in which to write anything, let alone masterpieces of literature.

The darkness of the cottage forms the background for my few and rather sketchy recollections of that time, dominated in a strange way by the silhouette of the frame and bars of the window through which I remember seeing the branches of a tree against the sky. The stairs were very steep and narrow, without any daylight, but there was a rope which helped to lead one up to the tiny landing and the two bedrooms.

I still remember, vividly, sitting on a wooden chair with my feet on another chair, a blue rug with red lines forming a squared pattern thrown over my legs, groaning and trying to snap my fingers as I had seen my father do when he had an attack of gout. My mother, passing through the room on her way upstairs, would stop and say: 'I think you ought to find something better to do.' I suppose it was a normal reaction for a child to what must have seemed the very frequent attention that my father needed when he was ill.

The game of 'being ill' was cured but the memory of that unhappy

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morning has remained with me ever since. We had a daily help as my mother was lame even in those days and suffered a lot of pain from her damaged knee. One day when my father was ill she had to go out, presumably to fetch the doctor, and I was left alone with the daily help. Whether it was devilment on my part, or boredom, is immaterial, but when my mother had gone I sat myself down on a chair with my feet on another with the rug thrown over my knees, twiddling my thumbs and groaning. Suddenly I was seized by the arm, dragged up the stairs and thrust into my father's bedroom where he was lying in bed, his throat so swollen that from where I stood I could only just see his forehead. I broke free of the grip that held me and clambered down the stairs followed by the 'ogre'. When I hear, in a coarse and raucous voice, 'That'll teach yer', those awful moments come rushing back and the memories of nightmares peopled with beings with vastly swollen throats jostle for attention in my mind.

When my mother returned she was very worried by my scared appearance but I was too frightened to tell her what had happened. I could feel the eyes of the daily help following me about the room warning me not to say anything. I never told my mother but somehow she found out and we very soon had a different daily help. My mother must have realised what had happened because as soon as the swelling of my father's throat had gone down I was taken in to see him. Thoughtless as the action was it cured me of playing at being ill!

The cottage was the northern one of a pair on the east side of the lane that passes through a small group of cottages and houses dominated by the church which is surrounded by the remains of an archiepiscopal palace, in the original village of Aldington. The next-door cottage was occupied by a butcher, but the only other thing I can remember about him was that his name was Dryland.

About eighty yards up the hill on the other side of the lane stood a row of cottages along the top of a bank, the nearest one of which was the home of Mr and Mrs Post, an elderly couple of country folk with whom my parents seemed to get on well. On fine evenings the three of us would walk up the hill, climb the rough steps cut into the bank and arrive on the square paved area in front of their cottage. My parents used to sit on the low wall that ran round two sides of the paving where it was pleasantly cool in hot weather as it faced east towards the farm on the other side of the lane where Mr Slingsby

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[More information](#)

ALDINGTON, 1904–10

5

lived. The church could just be seen to the right behind the farm buildings and the evening sun made the old stone walls and tiled roofs glow with a golden warmth.

My mother sat on the wall that stuck out from the front of the cottage with her injured leg laid along it, while JC sat facing the doorway. Mr Post leant against the jamb of the doorway behind his wife who sat bolt upright on a wooden chair to which she seemed to be rigidly fixed by glue. Her hands rested on her lap, her head remained quite still as her eyes moved from one to the other of my parents as they spoke. Their lack of movement must have been exceptional because my memory of them is more of two dummies than of two people; in fact the only movement on their part was made by Mr Post removing the stump of clay pipe from his mouth when he was going to say something. It was bizarre, four people sitting almost motionless carrying on a conversation in quiet unemotional tones while a child scrambled about on the bank or leant against one of his parents. In the autumn, when the chestnuts had fallen from the nearby tree, JC would play catch with me, or tell me to set up an old tin and supply him with chestnuts to throw into it, which he did with great skill while the quiet conversation continued.

JC often took me with him when he went to get butter and eggs from the farmer, Mr Slingsby, whose farm was further up the hill between us and the church. It was typical of many Kentish farms of the period, well drained – into the gutter at the side of the road – the stockyard always deep in straw and mud. What mud! To be fair it was no worse than other farms and it only drained down the road in very wet weather. A line of large squared stones from the nearby ruins had been laid from the farmyard gate to the door of the house so that it was possible to arrive indoors without bringing too much of the countryside in as well.

Before setting out for the farm JC would put on a pair of boots, then a pair of leather gaiters, all of which had to be spotlessly clean. My attire was a pair of blue serge shorts, a blue jersey, dark blue or black stockings and black boots, likewise spotlessly clean and polished. If it was cold we put on overcoats, and whatever the weather JC always wore a hat. We would walk up the hill and turn left along the cart track, open the yard gate and negotiate the stepping stones and arrive at the farmhouse door to be greeted by Mr Slingsby or his wife.

I was always surprised at seeing Mr Slingsby come across the

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muddy yard without getting his boots and leggings dirty; they were every bit as clean as JC's. Looking back it was as if the two men vied with each other to see who could keep clean and free from mud the longest. My father was very particular about his dress and was always well turned out but Mr Slingsby, on the other hand, apart from his boots and leggings, was not so particular. He wore knee-breeches, generously patched, and a Norfolk jacket, discoloured and also patched. Under this he wore a corduroy 'Westkit' in which reposed a massive watch, a real old turnip attached to a length of leather bootlace knotted into a buttonhole. On his head was a battered and stained cloth hat with several brightly coloured feathers stuck in behind the ribbon. Below the hat a pair of deep-set bright eyes in a weather-beaten face gave one a friendly look. His face was framed by a fringe of dark hair down each side and under the chin and, although much lined, appeared to be a young face with a smile lurking round the mouth. I have been told he was quite a character and JC spent a lot of time talking to him, though about what I have no idea. It would not have been about farming as that was of no interest to my father, likewise gossip or scandal had no attraction for him. It could have been about the Romney Marsh which stretched away from the foot of the hills about two miles south of Aldington.

Only a few friends came to see us here as it was about two miles across the fields and along the lane to Smeeth station; about seven miles to Hythe and eight miles to Ashford, from all of which one had to complete the journey in a horse and trap or, later, in a taxi.

There are only two friends of my father who stand out in my memory of those days. The first, Percival Gibbon, brought his family to live in a half-timbered cottage on the other side of the lane a little to the north of us. The other, Ford Madox Hueffer, lived about half a mile away across the fields at a house called Postling Green, which stands on the south side of the road to Lympne on the edge of the South Downs overlooking the Romney Marsh. On clear days the town of Rye with its hill-top church can be seen away to the southwest.

My mother often took me down the lane and across the field to see Maisie Gibbon. She walked very slowly with a stick because her damaged kneecap, the result of a fall some years earlier, gave her continual pain. The surgeon to whom she was taken tried to bend the knee over a bar, doing even more harm, and causing her excruciating

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ALDINGTON, 1904–10

7

pain. She kept me by her side while we were in the lane although we hardly ever saw any traffic, only an occasional farm-cart or a pony and trap, but as soon as we turned off the lane I was allowed to run on ahead. Down the rough stony track I'd rush, ignoring advice to take care, stumble on a stone and fall, grazing my knee. Doubtless there was a hullabaloo, soap and warm water, iodine and bandages, and finally a very subdued small boy being told to thank Auntie Maisie for tidying up the mess. There were many occasions when Mrs Gibbon came to my rescue and I have often thought since how patient she was when 'mother earth came up and hit me'. Her own two girls were much steadier on their feet. It may seem as though my mother did not care but I am sure she did. It was much easier for an able person to get the bandages and bring relief. The crushed flint surfaces of the roads and tracks of those days have gone; it was quite uncomfortable having the little sharp slivers of flint washed out from knees, hands and elbows, and sometimes it was three or four days before they had all been removed.

It was Hueffer who offered my father the cottage at Aldington, as a sub-tenant, as he, Hueffer, had moved to Postling Green. I am grateful to him for an arrangement which enabled my parents to get back to Kent and away from the Someries where Hueffer had led them a pretty dance. I was too young to notice but it must have been quite a circus for my mother. My first recollection of Hueffer is of being put into my high-chair opposite him at a meal-time where, it is more than likely, I gazed at him in an 'owlish' way as children sometimes do. It was not long before he took the offensive by trying to make me misbehave and then complain to my mother about the 'ill-mannered little brat'. After a number of similar incidents I was given my food in the kitchen. I do not remember ever hearing my parents remonstrate with Hueffer. Apart from these encounters I do not recall seeing him at the cottage though he must have been a fairly frequent visitor. I expect I was kept discreetly out of the way for it was not until we went to live at Capel House that I became aware of him again.

Other friends came, such as Garnett and Hope, but with these kindly and considerate people nothing happened to leave a memory, so their visits must have been happy ones, which is understandable, as they were very peaceful companions.

As a reward for being good or, perhaps, as a means of getting me to bed, my father used to make me one or two paper boats while I sat on

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Borys and John Conrad while at Aldington, 1909–10

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[More information](#)

ALDINGTON, 1904–10

9

his knee. When they were finished I would thank him, give him a kiss, scramble down and rush off to the kitchen where a large enamelled tin bath would be waiting in front of the cooker. My mother supervised my undressing while the daily help poured in the hot water from an enormous kettle which was always kept simmering on the stove. A bucket or so of cold water was added until the temperature was about right and I was allowed to get in. Sometimes JC would come to see how the boats floated, at other times he would be called to look at some masterpiece of a bruise or a deep scratch. After making an inspection he would reassure my mother by saying he had seen worse. Bruises were always treated with arnica and brown paper while scratches, after being bathed, were dabbed with iodine and bandaged if necessary.

My father was most particular that I should be presentable at meal-times: clothes clean and tidy, hands washed and hair brushed. It was a rule that I should not get down from the table at the end of a meal without asking permission. If I forgot I was immediately called back and made to sit quite still for five minutes. 'Quite still' meant just that, hands, head and feet all had to be kept motionless and my father would get very angry with anyone who tried to make me move by tickling me or any other trick. There were frequent rows with Hueffer when he deliberately tried to make me move or behave badly. It seemed to me that his one aim was to make trouble for me. If I did not respond he suggested that I was 'dim' and if I did, he pounced on me for bad behaviour.

My parents took me with them whenever they went out as there was no one with whom they felt they could leave me, and so I was with them one dark and windy evening as we returned to the cottage. We had turned off the Ashford to Folkestone road into the lane and were approaching the tunnel through the railway embankment when a train passed over, travelling towards Folkestone and throwing up a shower of sparks from its funnel. JC, sitting in front by the driver, turned round and patted me on the knee saying: 'Look, Jackilo, see the train with the iron horse.' For a long time after that I was most disappointed when our little pony, pulling the trap home through the dark, did not give off a shower of sparks – only one or two when her hoof struck a stone. Whenever I pass under a railway when a train is passing overhead, I remember that evening sitting close to my mother wrapped in a rug, JC and the driver outlined against the glare of the lights and the darkness receding as we moved on into the



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---

10

JOSEPH CONRAD: TIMES REMEMBERED

night, along the white grit surface with broad green verges enclosed by high hedges giving the impression of an endless cavern.

Towards the end of our stay at the cottage we made afternoon trips in the little pony-trap behind Jenny, the small brown mare, to Capel House to which we were going to move. I was looking forward to the move as there was a long moat on the east side and lots of trees and ponds as well as woodlands. I was also to have a playroom which I was to share with my mother.

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## Capel House days, 1910–14