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PART I

Life and Works

CHAPTER I

*Life**J. H. Stape*

The story of Conrad's life has been the subject of intense scholarly research since Jocelyn Baines' *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography* (1959).¹ Prior to that, a mainly hagiographical approach dominated, with biographies by Conrad's wife and his friends Richard Curle and Jean-Aubry benefiting from first-hand observation of their subject and usefully preserving materials that might otherwise have been lost, but, for all their intimacy, falling short on accuracy and completeness.² Several myths of Conrad's own creation have needed demolition, and during the past half-century biographers have constructed a more nuanced picture of a man whose life has long been a focus of interest and speculation on the part of those who read his fiction.

Born in Berdyczów in 1857 (3 December) in the central Ukraine, formerly Polish but then under Russian rule, to Polish parents of the gentry class, Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, the only child of a writer and ardent nationalist, died in the village of Bishopsbourne near Canterbury in 1924 (3 August), a British subject and a widely renowned author. He had turned to writing in his third language after a career in the French and English Merchant Navies that took him to the Caribbean, the Far East, Australia and Africa, providing him with a stock of impressions and experiences that he drew upon for his writings.

Conrad, who spoke of his own duality – 'Homo duplex in my case has more than one meaning' (*CL* 3:89) – saw himself as having led three lives: as Pole, seaman and writer. However useful at first sight, these categories fall short of delineating his complexities of temperament and experience, nor are they water-tight: Conrad had begun writing even while at sea, and although aspects of a Polish identity – language and Roman Catholicism – were abandoned in the transition to England, the values and attitudes of his native culture, as well as memories of a difficult childhood and youth in Russian and Austrian Poland, not only remained with him throughout adulthood but also influenced his outlook and work. In his impressionist

autobiography *A Personal Record* (serialized 1908–9; 1912), he declares his intention to present ‘a coherent justifiable personality both in its origins and its action’ (xxi); the work itself depicts a chameleon, multiplex self confronting vicissitude, the coherence imposed by artistic design.

A sickly child and an orphan at the age of eleven, Conrad had already experienced radical displacement in his native environment, and attachment to a geographic locale was not an option open to him. Condemned to exile for their political activities, his parents took him to Vologda, in northern Russia, and, after his mother’s premature death of tuberculosis in 1865, his father, Apollo Korzeniowski (1820–69), wandered in several Galician towns with his son before ending up in Cracow where he died a broken man.

Thereafter the ward of his maternal grandmother and maternal uncle, Tadeusz Bobrowski (1829–94), a landowner in the Ukraine, Conrad lived in Lemberg (now L’viv) and Cracow before leaving for Marseilles and a career at sea in 1874, at sixteen. His education was mainly through private schooling and tutoring, and his childhood and adolescence, periods of rapidly shifting ties, severe emotional upheaval and traumatic loss, were punctuated by physical and nervous illnesses. Political tensions provided the backdrop for his youth: the Polish nation-state had ceased to exist with the Third Partition of 1795, and her peoples, fragmented, lived under Prussian, Austrian and Russian domination. To be Polish, then, was a cultural, not a national, identity, and until he took up British nationality in August 1886 Conrad was the Tsar’s subject.

The son of political criminals, Conrad’s prospects in Austrian Poland were limited, and his choice of a career at sea, pursued from 1874 to 1894, not only fulfilled a youthful ambition but also, and much more importantly, provided him with the exotic locales that he would draw on for his writing. In the event, the choice proved troubled. In France, his nationality barred him from long-term employment after he made a few voyages to the French Antilles; in England, his decision to climb the ranks from ordinary seaman to a captaincy went mainly unrewarded as employment opportunities shrank. The so-called ‘Long Depression’ of the 1890s, an abundant labour supply and technological change that saw an increase of tonnage but a contraction in the number of ships reduced the number of berths. These difficult labour conditions, exacerbated by the Great Dock Strike of 1889, forced Conrad to seek employment with a Belgian company in Africa, an experience that shattered his health, while the moral degradation he witnessed in the Congo’s economic exploitation disgusted him. By way of compensation, the ordeal provided him with material for ‘An Outpost of

Progress' and 'Heart of Darkness'; it also profoundly altered his world-view, allowing him to speak powerfully to contemporary and later audiences.

Having obtained his professional credentials, Conrad rarely found a berth commensurate with his qualifications, and he generally did not get along well with the captains over him, perhaps his happiest years at sea being those in the crack clipper, the *Torrens* (1891–3), taking passengers to Australia. During Conrad's time at sea, he put down deep roots in England, despite being necessarily absent for long periods, particularly on voyages to Australia. His closest friendships, with Fountaine Hope (G. F. W. Hope, 1854–1930) and Phil Krieger (Adolph Philip Krieger, c. 1850–1918), were with men engaged in business, although Hope had also been at sea. One suspects that emotional solitude characterizes Conrad's early life in England and in English ships, where his intellectual interests and manner set him apart, and his habit of reading, taken up in childhood, stood him in good stead. He read deeply and widely in contemporary French literature, a profound influence on his work and outlook.

In the event, authorship proved a wiser choice than the sea. Although no less precarious than seamanship, at least before achievement and recognition, Conrad's writing career opened as literacy rates climbed, new audiences were created and both the high- and low-brow ends of the market expanded. The happy few could enjoy large incomes (Kipling and Arnold Bennett are cases in point) in an increasingly professionalized market in which the new institution of the literary agent, legal contracts, better copyright conditions and literary associations secured a writer's interests, and, if not wholly effacing the past's unstable conditions, at least mitigated them.

A self-proclaimed 'artist' contemptuous of 'the Democracy of the book-stalls' (*CL* 5:173), Conrad's aesthetic posture ensured that financial security eluded him from the outset of his career, in 1895, until 1914. During the long wait for a popular audience, he none the less managed to place himself at the forefront of the day's writers, particularly with early works like *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897) and *Lord Jim* (1900). He created for himself a profile as a sea-writer at a time when England's emotional attachments to and financial interests in the sea were still strong. This label increasingly became a sore point, with advantages as regards audience recognition but proving much too confining and narrow as a definition of his work.

Despite gratifying recognition from the literary elite and intelligentsia, Conrad was not spared the hard necessity of providing for himself and his family, and had to supplement his income with loans from friends with deep pockets (particularly John Galsworthy) and grants: a Royal Bounty Grant in 1905, a Royal Literary Fund award in 1908 and a Civil List pension

of £100, held from 1910 to 1917 when circumstances permitted him to resign it. In 1900, Conrad placed his literary affairs under professional management, becoming a client of the highly successful J. B. Pinker (1863–1922), who also acted for Henry James, Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy and, briefly and unhappily, D. H. Lawrence. Allowing Pinker to place his work on the open market and arrange contracts worked well up to a point, but it also led to increased stresses and strains. Never accurately predicting his output or able to keep to deadlines, Conrad almost always fell behind as projects grew and expanded beyond his original estimates. In time this *modus operandi* collapsed altogether, the writer so deeply in debt to his agent as to place into question Pinker's business acumen. Conrad was, however, fortunate in his choice of agent, who, over the years, played many parts – generous banker, father-figure, general factotum and, ultimately, friend.

Marrying in 1896 (24 March), Conrad's choice lit upon a lower-middle-class woman (her father was warehouseman to a book-dealer in Lambeth), Jessie Emmeline George (1873–1936), twelve years his junior and, when he met her, working for a typewriter manufacturing company.³ His previous romantic attachments, also to younger women – in Mauritius to Eugénie Renouf, and to Émilie Briquel, a Frenchwoman he met in Geneva – were apparently serious, but scant available evidence discreetly conceals their emotional depth. Some biographers also argue for an attachment to Marguerite Poradowska (née Marguerite-Blanche-Marie Gachet de la Fournière, 1848–1937), a distant marriage relation (in letters, 'Tante Marguerite'), widowed shortly after they first met, a bluestocking and established novelist resident in Brussels and Paris.

Jessie Conrad, the second child in a family of nine children, proved a largely maternal figure to her husband, to whom in due course she bore two sons (Alfred Borys Leo) (1898–1978) and John Alexander (1906–82). Not perhaps temperamentally, or by his childhood experience, particularly prepared for paternity or domestic life, Conrad none the less seems to have enjoyed aspects of bourgeois family life, proving a dutiful and affectionate husband and father.⁴

Living in the countryside after their marriage – the Conrads rented homes in Essex, Bedfordshire and, mainly, Kent – was cheaper than life in the metropolis, and even periods on the Continent – Capri in 1905, Montpellier in the winters of 1906 and 1907 – were partly motivated by economics, daily life then being cheaper abroad. Conrad was, however, never provident; a history of overspending and even economic recklessness dates back to his period in Marseilles. In time, his makeshift solutions brought him to breaking-point. Plagued by ill-health in his early childhood,

by nervous complaints in adolescence and depression of varying severity in adulthood, for which he resorted to hydropathic cures in Switzerland, in early 1910 he suffered a complete breakdown and took several months to recover fully. Given the patterns he had established by mid-life, it seems almost predictable.⁵ One factor in this as well is the collapse of his friendship with his sometime collaborator, Ford Madox Hueffer (later Ford).

Following his recovery, Conrad's work became generically and stylistically more conventional, one eye cannily fixed upon a wider audience that would include women: then, as now, the majority of readers. With *Chance* (1913), he abandoned the philosophical and political interests that so dominate *Nostromo* (1904) – perhaps the novel he most agonized over – *The Secret Agent* (1907) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911) to take up domestic issues in an English setting, including the topic of women's suffrage, then being fought out in the streets as well as in Parliament.

In late July 1914, after a seven-year absence from the Continent, the Conrads made an ill-advised trip to Austrian Poland that nearly ended in disaster. Caught up by the outbreak of the First World War, they took refuge in the mountain resort of Zakopane, making their way back to England via Vienna and Genoa, with the help of influential friends. Conrad, an enemy alien of reputation, had narrowly missed being interned for the war's duration. Wholeheartedly supportive of Britain, he was deeply moved by the conflict. His son Borys, who received a commission, was shell-shocked and gassed in France.

Conrad complained that the war drained his fitness for work, although he managed to revise *Victory* (1915) and to write *The Shadow-Line* (1917), fictions that return to the Far East settings of his distant past, as *The Arrow of Gold* (1919) does to the South of France of his youth. A writer mainly of retrospective impulse, Conrad also returned to the Far East in *The Rescue* (1920), finally finishing a work abandoned on his honeymoon in 1896. Now successful and established, he enjoyed a large audience, his work selling particularly well in America as the result of skilful, even muscular, marketing by his publisher F. N. Doubleday. He could also count on American interest in European culture, then still vibrant and engaged.

There is ample evidence of artistic enervation as Conrad's career entered its final years, both in the loosening of the prose and in the clumsy plotting. Ill-health accounts for some of this failing grasp: as gout afflicted his hands, he employed a secretary, Lilian M. Hallows. He also saddled himself with *Suspense*, a novel set in Genoa with the exiled Napoleon on Elba poised to return to France. The novel grew fitfully as he picked at other projects – a dramatization of *The Secret Agent* (1922) that was quickly withdrawn and

The Rover (1923), originally a short story set in the South of France that grew into a novel – and remained unfinished on his death.

Conrad's final years saw both him and his wife in chronic ill-health, and, rather than enjoying his achievement, Conrad was incapable of rest, ceaselessly worrying over his finances and preoccupied about his family's welfare after his death. Still, he enjoyed a comfortable later life, renting a large house with extensive grounds maintained by a staff of domestics and gardeners and riding in a chauffeured motor-car. John was sent to Tonbridge School and enjoyed private tutoring in mathematics and a stint in France to acquire the language.

An effort to ensure his posthumous fame was the collected editions of his work published in England (Heinemann) and America (Doubleday) in 1920–1, for which he wrote a series of short prefaces. In 1921, he and his wife sojourned in Corsica, a trip made to soak up atmosphere for *Suspense*, and in the spring of 1923 Conrad made a long-delayed trip to the United States, a publicity campaign orchestrated by Doubleday. New York's social and cultural elite lionized him, and he visited Boston and Yale University. In what his hostess described as 'a very delicate state of health',⁶ he was simultaneously exhausted and stimulated by the round of new impressions and by American vigour and generosity.

Returning home (June) to news that Borys had secretly married in the previous autumn, Conrad bravely faced this turn of affairs, but his son, never quite recovered from the war, also proved to be in the hands of money-lenders. Tensions were papered over, aided by the birth of a grandson in January 1924, although Jessie Conrad, wounded by her son's increasingly erratic behaviour, never reconciled herself to her daughter-in-law, Joan King.⁷ Even as Conrad's family life took an unhappy turn, he was offered – but graciously declined – a knighthood (1924) by the new Labour government of Ramsay MacDonald, following a line taken by Galsworthy and Kipling, and consistent with his refusal of honorary degrees from Oxford, Cambridge, Durham, Liverpool, Edinburgh and Yale.

Conrad's family life was difficult in his last years. Hugh Walpole described the atmosphere of a disastrous weekend at Oswalds, the Conrads' last home, in 1922: 'State of things really awfully bad. J.C. much worse – shrivelling up, looks like an old monkey and does nothing all day. The house divided absolutely into two camps and who is speaking the truth I really don't know.'⁸ By way of compensation there were a number of friendships, especially with younger men, including Richard Curle, a Scot long settled in England, who nursed literary ambitions but worked in journalism. Conrad was also especially close to Jean-Aubry, a Norman of literary and musical tastes resident in London and widely

connected on the Paris cultural scene. Conrad's friendship with Edward Garnett, his early literary mentor, intensified again as the two men aged, as did his friendship with Pinker.

A deeply private man, Conrad's choice of country life allowed him to mix in literary circles when it suited him, even though he was fully at ease in the great world and courtly, even punctilious, in manner and dress. (T. S. Eliot remarked to Stravinsky that Conrad was 'a Grand Seigneur, the grandest I have ever met'.)⁹ Oswalds, the former dower house of Bourne Park set in the rolling Kentish countryside, none the less opened its doors wide to a select circle of friends, with Curle and Aubry frequent visitors. Conrad's wife made friends in the neighbourhood, but aside from Sir John Millais, the painter's grandson and Conrad's chess partner, Conrad took slight interest in local affairs.

On his death, Conrad was recognized as one of the most important writers of his day. The broad outlines of his life have now been securely established, but tracts of it remain fundamentally unknowable. Frustratingly little evidence survives from the earlier periods, and when Conrad turned to writing, his life-story inevitably became the story of the conception and writing of his books. In rehearsing the surviving facts, which, *contra* Marlow in *Lord Jim*, do reveal important things, there are intractable interpretive problems. The gap yawns wide between the inner and outer man, for Conrad was particularly adept at adopting the carapace that late-Victorian and Edwardian protocols and his gentry background urged on him. His life-story is sometimes more truly grasped in the sideways glance or in the fissures of a larger, seemingly coherent picture.

NOTES

1. For a survey of biographies, see J. H. Stape, 'Conrad Biography as a Fine Art', *The Conradian*, 32.2 (2007), 57–75.
2. See the chapter by David Miller in the present volume, and Owen Knowles and Gene M. Moore, *Oxford Reader's Companion to Conrad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 35–7. See both for bibliographical details of the writings by Jessie Conrad, Curle and Jean-Aubry mentioned here.
3. She was not, as all biographical accounts assume, a typist. Conrad mentions her working for the American Caligraph Company, in fact a manufacturer, not a typing agency.
4. For a full discussion, see David Miller, 'The Unenchanted Garden: Children, Childhood, and Conrad', *The Conradian*, 31.2 (2006), 28–47.
5. In *Joseph Conrad and Psychological Medicine* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2002), Martin Bock discusses in detail the nature of Conrad's illnesses and the therapies upon which he relied.

6. Florence Doubleday, *Episodes in the Life of a Publisher's Wife* (New York: privately printed, 1937), p. 67.
7. Quickly troubled, the marriage had collapsed by 1932, and ended in an official separation in 1935; see Jessie Conrad to Walter and Helen Tittle, 31 December 1935, The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
8. The Diaries of Hugh Walpole, The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, diary entry: 5 February 1922.
9. Igor Stravinsky, *Themes and Conclusions* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972), p. 71.

CHAPTER 2

Chronology of composition and publication

Katherine Isobel Baxter

Accounting for Conrad's writing and publishing, we come up against a variety of problems, not least of which are his own reports of his compositional practice, at times forgetful, at others inventive.¹ This is particularly so when examining Conrad's first steps as a writer: whilst the basic facts of *Almayer's Folly's* composition given in *A Personal Record* may be roughly accurate, if unverifiable, Conrad's account of the manuscript's precarious journey through Europe and the Belgian Congo is sketched symbolically, drawing together disparate geographies and experiences, creating a sense of inevitability to his emergence as a writer.

What *is* clear is that Conrad had little trouble placing his first novel, and his choice of publishers was, we may presume, hardly haphazard. In 1894, when Conrad submitted the manuscript, Unwin's titles were decidedly global in their subject matter, including Rodway's *In the Guiana Forest* (1895), Mackie's *The Devil's Playground: A Story of the Wild North West* (1894) and Baron Conway's *Climbing and Exploration in the Karakoram-Himalayas* (1894), amongst many others. Moreover, Unwin's list did not shy away from books showing the shabbier side of colonialism, particularly in the East, notably Louis Becke's *By Reef and Palm* (1894). Thus Conrad's novel, of European colonialism in Malaya, fitted easily into Unwin's broader publishing strategy.

Conrad may well have done his research beforehand, but he could not have anticipated that his submission would lead to a lifelong friendship with Edward Garnett, a senior reader for Unwin. Garnett's enthusiasm for *Almayer's Folly* (published in April 1895, and in May with Macmillan in the USA) encouraged Conrad to continue with a second story, 'Two Vagabonds', which, developing into *An Outcast of the Islands*, was published by Unwin the following year. *An Outcast of the Islands* makes use of protagonists from *Almayer's Folly* to narrate a prior story, creating the second volume of what was to become, with *The Rescue*, a trilogy-in-reverse. All three drew on Conrad's own experience in the Far East. In