In the way of business.

In the lithograph ‘View of a Coal Seam on the Island of Labuan’ (1847) (Figure 1), the viewer is invited to witness possibly the first footprint of the colonizer in what for the newly arrived Europeans is an unknown territory. The landscape seems to overwhelm the two British men admiring a coal seam in the jungle. The figure towards the bottom right-hand corner wears the uniform of a Royal Navy officer, representing the military power by which colonial intrusion was underwritten. The other figure, in white, perhaps a civilian, is someone whose commercial imagination may, in his enthusiastic gesture, see the opportunity for gain in this remote spot, like the remote island coal-mine in *Victory*. However, it is also an image in which place, at the point in time in which the men are looking, aestheticizes entirely the commercial object, the coal seam a setting for a cascading waterfall. Our attention is drawn not to the coal seam – which, without the title to the lithograph, would not be identifiable as such – nor to the figures, but to the play of light, in which patches of light, together with the huge palm on the left, assert the primacy of view, not of utility.

In the commercial discourse on activity evident in the extracts from the company prospectus in *The Times* (1910) (Figure 2), the opportunity for commerce has become reality. The undisturbed jungle view of the lithograph here becomes fragmented into components of company promotion and commercial assessment of risk. What in the lithograph is view, is in the prospectus possession and measurement – ‘tenure’ and ‘acreage’; land has

---

1 This phrase, which occurs at least three times in the Asian fiction (*OI*, p. 16; *IJ*, p. 269; *Re*, p. 69), refers to a person’s business, as opposed to their personal, activities. As such it signifies the possibilities of congruence or opposition between these activities, possibilities that are part of the relations explored in Conrad’s Asian fiction.
become a function of ‘situation’, ‘altitude’, ‘contour’, ‘soil’, and ‘rainfall’. The section titled ‘Timber’ announces that 75 per cent of the total acreage is ‘old virgin forest’, comparable with the view in the lithograph but now seen as ‘valuable timber’. The globalized nature of exploitation is evident from the shares being offered in this venture in the Dutch East Indies not on the Amsterdam exchange, but in London. Cultivation is to be by people who, in the same way as the ‘virgin forest’ has become the commodity timber, have become the commodity ‘Labour’. The contemplation of the men in the lithograph has been transformed into purposeful economic activity.

The sites in Figures 1 and 2 are both in the Malay Archipelago, Labuan being the island colony ceded to Britain in 1846 off the north-west coast of Borneo. The lithograph and the prospectus demonstrate a continuity of European commercial interest in south-east Asia by the two major colonial
powers in the region\(^7\) as well as something of the effect of international commercial forces in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the period which includes the setting of the action of Conrad’s Asian fiction and his voyages in the region. It is part of the period in which Robert E. Elson describes economic and social change flowing:

\(^7\) D.G.E. Hall describes ‘South-East Asia’ as ‘a term which came into general use during the Second World War to describe the territories of the eastern Asiatic mainland forming the Indo-Chinese peninsula and the immense archipelago which includes Indonesia and the Philippines’. \textit{A History of South-East Asia}, 4th edn (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 3. Despite its creation after the time of Conrad’s fiction, the term usefully describes the region in which most of Conrad’s Asian fiction is set. The Archipelago, known in Conrad’s day as the Malay, Eastern, or Indian Archipelago, I will term ‘Malay Archipelago’.
Culture and Commerce in Conrad’s Asian Fiction

essentially from the unprecedented impact of international commerce on the economic and political structures of the region. Such commerce had long exerted a major role in shaping the nature of Southeast Asian politics and society but, driven by the imperatives of developing Western capitalism and the Industrial Revolution, particularly after about 1850, its global reach and irresistible dominance in this century-and-a-half transformed Southeast Asia with an astonishing thoroughness, rapidity and finality.3

European powers’ colonial interests were not simply about procuring cheap raw materials, but also finding markets for their European over-production. Commenting on literature as reflecting these changes, Angus Easson writes: ‘industry, trade, transport transformed the age […]’. The age was a business age and the writers were well aware of this transformation: it was the material of their fiction and they saw themselves increasingly as part of it.4 Indeed, Bagehot (1826–77) observed of commerce in England that ‘it is not only a thing definite and observable, but about the most definite thing we have, the thing which it is most difficult to help seeing’.5 While it was often claimed that commerce advanced civilization (even that it was divinely inspired), the tendency of literature in this period was to portray commerce as largely pernicious. Little literary criticism has been written on the representation in literature of business history (the history of business enterprises), the detailed activities of trade, or of commercial practice, and very little on the literary role such representation might play. However, there has been literary-critical attention given to concepts in literature such as capitalism, finance, and money.6 Although critics have sought to place

5 Economic Studies, p. 6.
6 For example, ‘Commerce is one of the principal means appointed by Providence for civilizing mankind’. Memoir on the Residency of the North-West Coast of Borneo’, in J.H. Moor, comp., Notices of the Indian Archipelago, and Adjacent Countries; Being a Collection of Papers relating to Borneo, Celebes, Bali, Java, Sumatra, Nias, the Philippine Islands, Sulus, Siam, Cochin China, Malay Peninsula, &c. (Singapore: [n.pub.], 1837), pp. 5–12 (p. 11).
Introduction

Conrad’s writing in a variety of historical and literary contexts, this has included little about that of commerce as represented in his writings, despite the fact that economic imperialism was commercial in realization.8

For the purposes of this book, Conrad’s ‘Asian fiction’ comprises works which have for the most part an Asian setting as well as sufficient commercial significance. ‘Asian fiction’ is used in preference to Robert Hampson’s ‘Malay fiction’—used in his Cross-Cultural Encounters in Joseph Conrad’s Malay Fiction—because settings in the works discussed in the present book include India (Lord Jim) and Siam (’Falk’ and The Shadow-Line), the latter two works not being included in Hampson’s valuable study.9 The works of Asian fiction so defined are, primarily: Almayer’s Folly (1895); An Outcast of the Islands (1896); Lord Jim (1900); ‘The End of the Tether’ (1902); ‘Falk’ (1903); Victory (1915); The Shadow-Line (1917); and The Rescue (1920). In order to concentrate on these primary works in the space available, a second group is only briefly discussed, in those chapters to which each is most relevant thematically: ‘Freya of the Seven Isles’ (1912), in Chapter 1; ‘Karain’ (1898) and ‘The Lagoon’ (1898) in Chapter 3; and ‘Because of the Dollars’ (1915) in Chapter 7.10

This book is the first book-length critical study of commerce in Conrad and the first such detailed critical study of the Dutch East Indies cultural and other background in his fiction. The book argues that Conrad’s portrayal of commerce in his Asian fiction offers an informed, complex, and historically specific context which serves as part of a wider cultural discourse to illuminate the underlying moral concerns of his writing (‘to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect’). Conrad’s portrayal also works against a reductive reading of commerce as either homogeneous or as necessarily contrary to the common good.

8 Richard Bithell wrote that ‘Economics [...] may be defined as the Science which treats of exchange-able things, and of the laws which regulate their exchange. It is a branch of the wider subject known as Political Economy. Political Economy treats of the laws which control the production, distribution, and consumption of wealth.’ A Counting-House Dictionary Containing an Explanation of the Technical Terms Used by Merchants and Bankers in the Money Market and on the Stock Exchange (London: George Routledge, 1882), p. 108. Commerce is ‘the exchange of merchandise or services’ (OED).
10 ‘The Secret Sharer’ (1910), ‘Typhoon’ (1902), and ‘Youth’ (1902) are excluded on grounds of insufficient commercial interest. ‘The Planter of Malata’ is not included as it has a Pacific setting, as illustrated by its Kanaka workers. Similarly, ‘A Smile of Fortune’ (1917) is set in Mauritius and Australia and so not included.
11 ‘Preface’ to NoN, pp. vii–xii (p. vii).
Indeed, Bagehot wrote that ‘the facts of commerce, especially of the great commerce, are very complex. Some of the most important are not on the surface; some of those most likely to confuse are on the surface’. Displaying in his works both critique and criticism of commerce, Conrad’s often ironic treatment of commerce reveals its ambiguities both for good and evil as well as its combination of active life in the workaday world with the inner life and aspirations of an individual. Indeed, Conrad’s treatment of commerce is what takes it beyond the satirical approach evident, for example, in Dickens’ *David Copperfield* (1850), Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now* (1875), and Wells’ *Tono-Bungay* (1909).

A broadly historicist methodology, allied to close readings of the texts, is employed to illuminate the significance of commerce in Conrad’s writings, reading with literary-commercial eyes. In the ‘Preface’ to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* Conrad specifically links the moral activity of the discovery of truth to a process involving the senses: ‘It is an attempt to find in its forms [of “the visible universe”], in its colours, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter and in the facts of life what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential – their one illuminating and convincing quality – the very truth of their existence’ (p. vii).

‘Aspect’ and ‘vision’ are significant words associated with this attempt. ‘Aspect’, appearing three times in the first paragraph of the ‘Preface’, conveys the importance of human perception and apprehension. ‘Vision’, mentioned three times in the ‘Preface’ (e.g. p. vii), represents not simply the act of observation, but of seeing within – a form of insight – which combines the senses and intuition to perceive the essence of the object, event, or feeling, the writer’s task being, as often quoted, ‘to make you see’ (p. x), the emphasis on the word conveying its special, insightful nature. With the inner truth of individuals obscure and unknowable and the outer world mysterious, phenomenology performs, as in the initial depiction of the shadowy Almayer in *A Personal Record* (1912), what sometimes cannot otherwise be adequately articulated, reflecting Conrad’s views about the inadequacies of language. This aesthetic informs all his writing and includes commerce as part of the ‘visible universe’.

---


14 See also ‘Preface’, p. ix.
In his study of Conrad’s Malay fiction, Hampson mentions some aspects of commerce, for example identifying that the narrative of *Victory* is ‘grounded in the material conditions of the archipelago’ and that commerce and mobility are characteristic of Conrad’s first two Malay novels. The present book argues that commerce is part of the formation, and a key occupation, of community and that in its historical specificity it relates to what has been described as ‘Conrad’s power to evoke the subjective lives of his characters in their interaction with each other and to place those lives in the wider historical perspective of their time, showing the personal and the historical as two sides of the same coin’. Indeed, this book aims to show, as a key objective, Conrad writing through commerce in order not only to illuminate his underlying moral concerns but also to contribute to characterization and to his depiction of relations at a point of advanced European imperialism. Investigating these aspects in relation to his Asian fiction offers the possibility of new readings. The book is organized into chapters on individual works of Conrad in order to allow such readings to be as fully evident and thorough as possible, as well as helpful for the reader wishing to study a particular work of the Asian fiction.

Conrad’s portrayal of various communities in south-east Asia – colonial, indigenous, and immigrant – shows commerce propelling activity, and, tellingly, as a vivifying and shaping force on community – Macassar ‘teeming with life and commerce’ (*AF*, p. 7) – as well as pervasive and inextricable. Conrad shows it too as shaping time, space, and culture – commercializing time and space – through, for example, communications, labour, and finance. Indeed, in Conrad we find the major

---

15 Cross-Cultural Encounters, pp. 148, 99. The book situates Conrad’s Malay fiction ‘within a specific discursive context, the British tradition of writing about Southeast Asia’ (Robert Hampson, Conrad’s Secrets (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), p. 23). In this, and in the contextual information of the times that Cross-Cultural Encounters provides, it does not seek significantly to draw out or draw on the specifically Dutch East Indies elements of this fiction. In Conrad’s Secrets, Chapter 1, Hampson discusses ‘covert plots and secret trades’ in connection with Almayer’s Folly, *An Outcast of the Islands*, and *The Rescue*, with the focus regarding trade being on gun-running, slavery, and the smuggling of gunpowder, treating certain aspects of the significance of these illicit trades in the texts as well as aspects of these trades’ histories. After finishing the underlying writing and research for this book I became aware of Agnes Yeow, Conrad’s Eastern Vision: A Vain and Floating Appearance (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Although not concentrating on the Dutch East Indies, Yeow’s book provides very useful information and discussions about the region (the Siamese element is not specifically discussed), including some aspects of the region’s trade and ethnic groups.

economic, political, and social issues of capitalism, colonialism, and globalization – in its evolving historical manifestations well before those of our own time – presented in the moral, physical, and social situations of his characters.\footnote{This contrasts with the suggestion by some writers that the globalization of commerce is a phenomenon of our own times.} While historically specific context is therefore provided – something which is informative in its own right – the book also uses this contextual material to serve other, more interpretative, literary-critical, aims. To understand the business conditions to which Conrad’s characters are subject it is necessary to understand something of the economic, social, and political history of the area and period.\footnote{The historiographical principle of seeing economics and politics in the light of each other is discussed in, for example, Howard Dick, ‘Introduction’ to Howard Dick, et al., \textit{The Emergence of a National Economy: An Economic History of Indonesia, 1800–2000} (Crows Nest, NSW, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2002), pp. 1–8 (p. 2).} Rather than such issues and commerce being represented satirically (though they are often represented ironically), or as sites of ideological argument, they find representation in the texture and detail of the culturally specific context, and it is from the lived, subjective experience of that commerce that Conrad’s representation draws its effectiveness. For example, Conrad depicts certain individuals of integrity and generosity of spirit connected with commerce (Mr Tesman and Captain Davidson in \textit{Victory}, Captain Ford in \textit{Almayer’s Folly}) and businessmen who are endowed with special wisdom and who exemplify the Conradian virtues of faithfulness, restraint, and compassion (Stein in \textit{Lord Jim} and, it can be argued, Alfred Jacobus in ‘A Smile of Fortune’). Part of Conrad’s treatment of commerce is linked to what is in effect his industrial creed, in which the participant’s role in industry is couched in the terms such as ‘redeeming’, ‘ideal’, ‘art’, and ‘grace’ and, above all, the moral (p. 24) measure so significant to Conrad’s writing, rendering it a crucial articulation of the high value which such work occupies in his ethos.\footnote{Alan Heywood Kenny points out some of the links between Conrad’s and Carlyle’s writings and ‘work ethic’, analysing briefly their relevance to the character of Marlow, ‘Conrad and Carlyle’, \textit{The Journal of The Joseph Conrad Society (U.K.)}, 5/1 (March 1980), 7, 19 (p. 7). For an in-depth study of Conrad and Carlyle, see Rob Breton, \textit{Gospels and Grit: Work and Labour in Carlyle, Conrad, and Orwell} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).}

While some of the ways in which Conrad utilizes commerce in order to lend significance are relatively apparent, this book further analyses this process through research into commercial history and into the commercial practices then current. The book draws on academic sources and on a
range of largely nineteenth-century commercial, government, and other non-literary discourse, areas of discourse which are not commonly applied to Conrad studies; in the case of the wider contemporary commercial record, such sources and academic writing have been rarely applied, and never extensively. Some use is also made of records and writing in Dutch, a necessary requirement for such a study. Detailed reference to historical sources, some of them archival, that are contemporary with Conrad’s settings enables a new, historically specific, light to be thrown on Conrad’s Asian fiction. Such reference is also part of the historical recovery the book seeks to achieve, as well as of how it makes and evidences its argument, aiming to avoid discussion by generality and admitting a sense of the texture and granularity of the times. This extensive historical reference would not always sit well in the main text, the purpose of which is to convey the argument and to provide readings of the texts. A proportion of the historical reference has therefore been included in footnotes, some of which are necessarily detailed, so that the book’s argument and textual interpretations can be read coherently.

The readings of individual works by Conrad incorporate this research and reflect the topics arising in individual texts against a broader social, commercial, and political background. The significance of commerce in Conrad’s fiction is such that it would merit examination in many of his writings. Limiting the scope of this book to Conrad’s Asian fiction, which comprises approximately a third of Conrad’s works, offers the opportunity to investigate the topic in a body of work which is both substantial and culturally cohesive, albeit this excludes Nostromo and ‘Heart of Darkness’, both important works with major commercial elements.20 The category of Asian fiction, like that of Malay fiction in Hampson’s Cross-Cultural Encounters, also works against the received literary-critical concept of a Conrad canon which, although now no longer wholeheartedly endorsed, has coloured some critical opinion and reduced the attention given to those works claimed by some to be of lesser importance – for example, Almayer’s Folly. The category of Asian fiction therefore allows not only for a fresh interpretation of several major works of Conrad, such as Lord Jim and Victory, in relation to commerce, but also for critical re-examination of a number of works sometimes considered of less value, which benefit from investigation under this new approach.

20 Similarly, ‘A Smile of Fortune’ is a work with a particularly commercial interest. See Andrew Francis, “‘In the Way of Business’: The Commerce of Love in “A Smile of Fortune”’, The Conradian, 37/2 (Autumn 2012), 67–79.
The structure of the book is to a certain extent chronological by date of publication, although the three works of the Lingard Trilogy are treated in the first three chapters in view of the features they share, including the decline of Lingard’s mode of trade in the face of increasing competition and globalization. Chapter 4 explores *Lord Jim*, Conrad’s broadest representation of commerce and colonialism in the Asian fiction. ‘Falk’ and *The Shadow-Line* are considered in Chapters 5 and 6 respectively, both works being partly set in Bangkok and concerned with issues of commerce and dependability. Chapter 7 discusses ‘The End of the Tether’ and Chapter 8 *Victory*, both as evincing later colonial capitalism.

The settings of the Asian fiction include the British Straits Settlements, the Dutch East Indies, British India, and Siam. Although present-day readers are likely to be familiar to a degree with some of the background to these locations – and, in the case of British readers, particularly those of India and Singapore – the Dutch East Indies and independent Siam are more obscure, as are the activities of the Arab, Chinese, and indigenous communities in the region to whom Conrad also gave expression. While further information is provided in the following chapters, a brief introduction to the political and commercial background is appropriate, concentrating on the Dutch East Indies since this is the most frequent setting of the Asian fiction.

**Political Background**

Conrad’s south-east Asia comprised a great variety of races, creeds, languages, and polities. Although his Asian fiction centres mainly on Singapore, east Borneo, Bangkok, and ports in Java, it is set in a wider geographical and political context which included French Indo-China, Portuguese Timor, Siam, British Burma, the Spanish Philippines, and Australia, a region dominated by five European powers and one indigenous kingdom (map, Figure 3).

Conrad experienced south-east Asia first-hand during voyages in 1883 and 1887–88, when he visited Bangkok, Singapore, Surabaya, and other ports, including Tanjung Redebe in east Borneo, which was to provide the setting for *Almayer’s Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands* as well as his inspiration to begin writing. He also visited Bombay and Calcutta (present-day Mumbai and Kolkata). Although *The Rescue* is set at the end of the 1850s, his Asian fiction mainly reflects Asia of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. During this period and into the following century, European colonial powers, motivated by profit and prestige, continued to acquire possessions in south-east Asia. In the nineteenth century France acquired various territories in Indo-China. The Dutch, having almost entirely displaced