

## INTRODUCTION

CONRAD'S GREATEST NOVEL, 'an intense creative effort on what I suppose will always remain my largest canvas,' as he proclaimed,<sup>1</sup> began life late in 1902 as an idea for a short story and developed slowly over the next two years into the vivid panorama, a history which explores and dramatizes the making of history, that was finally published in novel form in October 1904. In a letter from the period of the tale's inception Conrad reflects, 'I doubt if greatness can be attained now in imaginative prose work. When it comes it will be in a new form; in a form for which we are not ripe as yet' (*Letters*, II, 463). In *Nostromo*, Conrad would embark upon such a 'new form', but not even he could have envisaged the 'greatness' that would accrue to it. Later, in *A Personal Record* (1912), he recalled that the words 'failure' and 'astonishing' had both been applied to the novel, while going on to give some inkling of that 'intense creative effort' necessary to win the strenuous new form whose ripening came about under his hand:

I had, like the prophet of old, 'wrestled with the Lord' for my creation, for the headlands of the coast, for the darkness of the Placid Gulf, the light on the snows, the clouds on the sky and for the breath of life that had to be blown into the shapes of men and women, of Latin and Saxon, of Jew and Gentile.<sup>2</sup>

In *Nostromo*, Conrad conferred upon the English novel a new way of writing simultaneously about place and politics, fashioning a realism enlarged beyond that of *Middlemarch*, say, with which to portray humankind's encounter with the local, the global and the elemental and cosmic conditions it faces. *Nostromo* also inaugurated a new phase of writing in Conrad's career. From *Almayer's Folly* onwards, his works had been alert to the machinations of power in colonial situations; but in *Nostromo*, predicting the American century to come, Conrad turns his attention directly towards the political processes shaping the present and the future of a modern world in the throes of what we

<sup>1</sup> 'Author's Note' (1920), *The Secret Agent*, ed. Bruce Harkness and S. W. Reid (1990), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> *A Personal Record*, ed. Zdzisław Najder and J. H. Stape (2008), p. 91.

would now term an incipient ‘globalization’. Together with *The Secret Agent* (1907) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911), *Nostromo* exhibited what George Orwell called ‘a grown-upness and political understanding ... almost impossible to a native English writer at that time’.<sup>1</sup>

In the ‘Origins’ and ‘Sources’ sections, this introduction will identify Conrad’s processes as a novelist that led him in *Nostromo* to create a new scope, for English fiction. But, as our reading experience of the novel itself (treated, historically, in the ‘Reception’ section) demonstrates, however much scholarship identifies particular historical events and personages as the sources of Conrad’s conceptions, *Nostromo* then unties itself from them to create, through *fiction*, the confusing, sometimes bewildering, sense of being in history itself.

## ORIGINS

THE ORIGINS OF *Nostromo* can be traced to four aspects of Conrad’s life and times: his early experiences; his immediate situation as a novelist and man of letters in 1902; what he discovered about South America in his reading; and the contemporary political events, and social and intellectual encounters, that had a direct impact upon him. Taking them in this order unfolds a chronology that led to the creation of Costaguana and *Nostromo* in an entwining of personal experience and inheritance with historical and current political events, one which allowed Conrad the peculiar configuration of proximity and distance in relation to his subject that sustained more than two years of vast creative labour.

Among the experiences that might have led Conrad to set a novel in South America are his adventures in the Caribbean. Between December 1874 and February 1877 the young Konrad Korzeniowski undertook three voyages there, in the employ of the Marseilles shipping firm Delestang et Fils, spending about forty weeks all told in the area formerly known as the Spanish Main. Exactly where he might have landed on the north coast of South America remains a matter of speculation, but it is agreed that this is as close as he got, geographically, to Costaguana, the fictional setting for the novel he began to write a quarter of a century later. Conrad’s most precise declaration

<sup>1</sup> George Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. iv, *In Front of Your Nose 1945–1950* (1970), p. 550.

on the matter was made almost as many years later again, to Richard Curle in 1923:

As to *No[stromo]*. If I ever mentioned 12 hours it must relate to P[uerto] Cabello where I was ashore about that time. In LaGuayra as I went up the hill and had a distant view of Caracas I must have been 2½ to 3 days. It's such a long time ago! And there were a few hours in a few other places on this dreary coast of Ven[ezue]la. (*Letters*, VIII, 140)

It is not clear whether Conrad visited three or six towns on the coast of Venezuela and the northern coast of Colombia, nor whether he arrived in these ports in the *Saint-Antoine* or in other, smaller vessels as he accompanied Dominic Cervoni in a gun-running escapade for conservative forces during the troubled year of insurrections in the region, 1876. Hans van Marle, reviewing all the evidence in 1991, concluded that Cervoni and the young Korzeniowski absented themselves, unrecorded, for some time during the two months between the *Saint-Antoine's* arrival at Saint-Thomas and departure from Haiti; that they did make landfall somewhere on that northern coast (Conrad wrote to Elizabeth Dummett in 1917 about seeing Cartagena), and then returned to their ship on a steamer on a regular line of service.<sup>1</sup>

Conrad gave contradictory accounts of the substance and location of Costaguana. He stated to Michael Holland in 1913: 'Costaguana is no particular S Am. State but a compound of many, mostly of Mexico, Argentina and Paraguay, with a dash of Banda Oriental and traces of Venezuela'.<sup>2</sup> This location of Costaguana in three countries he certainly never visited conflicts with his comment to Edmund Gosse in 1918:

The geographical basis is, as you have seen, mainly Venezuela; but there are bits of Mexico in it, and the aspect presented by the mountains appertains in character more to the Chilian seaboard than to any other ... The rest of the meteorology belongs to the Gulf of Panama and, generally, to the Western Coast of Mexico as far as Mazatlan. (*Letters*, VI, 231)

Again, though he rounded Cape Horn (in 1879, in the *Duke of Sutherland*), Conrad never visited the west coast of either South or Central America. While the powerful presence of Dominic Cervoni as a model for Nostromo encourages investigation of Conrad's Caribbean adventures as formative for the novel, Costaguana itself eludes direct

<sup>1</sup> Hans van Marle, 'Lawful and Lawless: Young Korzeniowski's Adventures in the Caribbean', *LEpoque Conradienne*, 17 (1991), 91–113.

<sup>2</sup> *Letters*, v, 325. 'Banda Oriental' was the old name for Uruguay.

correlation with the first-hand experiences of Conrad's early maritime life.<sup>1</sup>

Some commentators see the origins of the novel as lying considerably further back and in the circumstances surrounding Conrad's own life. Gustav Morf's 1930's study blamed John Galsworthy for popularizing the attractive but, to his mind, erroneous claim that 'in *Nostromo* Conrad made a continent out of just a sailor's glimpse of a South American port, some twenty years before', which, he says, 'has come to be accepted simply because of the insufficient knowledge of Conrad's Polish past, on which the whole novel is really built'.<sup>2</sup> Morf is quoting Conrad here, and Conrad's own words, in his letter to Cunninghamham Graham of 8 July 1903, could be read as supporting either view: 'I am dying over that cursed *Nostromo* thing. All my memories of Central America seem to slip away. I just had a glimpse 25 years ago – a short glance. That is not enough pour bâtir un roman dessus' (*Letters*, III, 45). Frederick Karl comments acutely that 'Conrad could not deal simply in glimpses, although he would have liked to'.<sup>3</sup> For Morf, *Nostromo's* origins were political and historical, and with a different geography altogether: 'The revolution theme itself, which might seem to be so characteristic of Latin America, reminds one distinctly of the struggle between Poles and Russians.' Bluntly he states that 'Costaguana stands for Poland' and seeks to identify Sulaco with Cracow: 'All the repressed Polish reminiscences, sentiments, aspirations and resentments, lying deep under the surface of the artist's conscious mind, had their day of rehabilitation when this book was written ... Without them, there would be no *Nostromo*.'<sup>4</sup> More recent work, inflected towards Conrad as a child of specifically borderland *szlachta* parents, argues a more nuanced position for the later writer who recalls, in *A Personal Record*, a multinational Ukraine, which has compelling suggestions for the complex account of nationalist ideals and practices that characterize the transnational world of *Nostromo*.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The most extensive researches in this direction have been by Andrzej Braun in *The Creation of Costaguana: Conrad's South American World* (1989; in Polish).

<sup>2</sup> John Galsworthy, *Castles in Spain* (1927), p. 93; Gustav Morf, *The Polish Heritage of Joseph Conrad* (1930), p. 127.

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Karl, *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives* (1979), p. 456.

<sup>4</sup> Morf, *Polish Heritage*, p. 148. For a dissenting view see Zdzisław Najder, 'A Century of *Nostromo*', *Conradiana*, 40, no. 3 (Fall 2008), 242.

<sup>5</sup> See Stephen Brodsky and Joanna Skolik in *From Szlachta Culture to the 21st Century, Between East and West: New Essays on Joseph Conrad's Polishness*, ed. Wiesław Krajka (2013). See also Robert Hampson, "'Books May Be Written in All Sorts of Places": Conrad's Transnational Beginnings', *L'Epoque Conradianne*, 41 (2019), 29–40.

Conrad in his 'Author's Note' (1917) to *Nostromo* offers only one association between the novel and Poland: his avowal that Antonia Avelanos is modelled upon his first love. Karl speculates whether this was Tekla Syroczyńska in Lwów or Janina Taube in Cracow, before concluding that Antonia is a mythologized composite of the two, strongly bound up with an image of Conrad's mother.<sup>1</sup> Ewelina Bobrowska has also been taken up as providing a model for Emilia Gould, with her courtship and marriage to Charles Gould 'reminiscent of the devotion of Conrad's young parents to one another'.<sup>2</sup> While none of these autobiographical indications is conclusive, it is evident that Conrad's personal past infused the mixture that became *Nostromo*.

Conrad's contemporary life as a writer yields origins of a different sort. He himself identifies a period of imaginative emptiness in his 'Author's Note': 'after finishing the last story of the "Typhoon" volume, it seemed somehow that there was nothing more in the world to write about'.<sup>3</sup> Fifteen years after the event, Conrad's memory has created this vacuum, as in practice throughout 1902 he was working on 'The End of the Tether', and late in the year he even resumed work on *The Rescue*. More pertinent to *Nostromo*, immediately after the completion of the 'Typhoon' volume, Conrad worked intensively for three months on *Romance*, with Ford Madox Ford. Parallels with *Nostromo* such as the presence of a bay (a lagoon in *Romance*), a mob controlled or exploited for political ends and a sea escape involving a near collision, enshrouded in fog in *Romance* and in darkness in *Nostromo*, provide suggestions, at least, for the one book as being in some measure formative for the other.<sup>4</sup> More profoundly suggestive for Conrad's exploration of 'the immense indifference of things' (384.17–18) that will swallow up Decoud is Kemp's perception of 'something pitiless, belittling, and cruel in the precipitous immobility of the sheer walls' of the ravine where he sees Manuel's fallen, broken body.<sup>5</sup> Broadly, 'Through writing *Romance*, [Conrad] also learned how to write fiction

<sup>1</sup> Karl, *Conrad: The Three Lives*, pp. 101–4.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Nadelhafft, *Joseph Conrad* (1991), p. 84.

<sup>3</sup> 'To-morrow' was completed on 16 January 1902.

<sup>4</sup> See Karl, *Conrad: The Three Lives*, pp. 453–4, and Raymond Brebach, *Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, and the Making of 'Romance'* (1985), pp. 98–100. Ivo Vidan goes further to imply that *Romance* constitutes artistic preparation, in 'Rehearsal for *Nostromo*', *Studia Romanica et Anglicae Zagrabiana*, 12 (1961), 9–16.

<sup>5</sup> References to the texts of the present edition appear in round brackets. These references, along with others to Cambridge Edition volumes, employ both page and line numbers (e.g. 38.16–17).

at a distance from his own immediate experience’,<sup>1</sup> and the collaboration asked him to write about Latin America in the vein of adventure, even if it did not require of him the immersion in history and politics that writing *Nostromo* would do.

Conrad himself locates the origin of the novel in pure contingency, the chance arrival into his creative blankness of ‘a shabby volume picked up outside a second-hand book-shop’ which recalled an anecdote first heard ‘twenty-six or seven years’ previously in the Caribbean (5.26–27). This book was identified many years ago by Ian Watt and John Halverson as *On Many Seas: The Life and Exploits of a Yankee Sailor* by Frederick Benton Williams (nom de plume of Herbert Elliott Hamblen), published in 1897. In his ‘Author’s Note’, Conrad recounts the narrator’s meeting with the captain of the schooner *Santa Maria*, though thankfully without the colour of the ruffian Nicolo’s English: “I no care for what leedle money I make here, but I mus git reesh slow, don you see?” (p. 288). Watt surmises that the root of the story goes back to historical events of 1821, when Captain Thompson of the *Mary Dear* was reputed to have hidden silver on Cocos Island, off Panamá, for citizens in Lima who feared the advance of the revolutionary army of San Martín.<sup>2</sup> Conrad says he ‘did not see anything at first in the mere story’ (6.34–35), and characterizes it as ‘completely destitute of valuable details’ (5.17); yet, as well as getting rich slowly, he uses the details of a ‘north-bound steamer’, and Nicolo’s invention that ‘a big steamer had run him down’. More tellingly, the sentence ‘The Isthmus in those days was an exceedingly turbulent territory, and when a revolution was on, mob law prevailed, and property of all kinds was stolen or destroyed with perfect impartiality’ (288) anticipates the language and manner that will be adopted in a sustained fashion by *Nostromo*’s narrator.<sup>3</sup>

Just as the ‘story’ of Winnie Verloc did not become *The Secret Agent* until ‘the vision of an enormous town presented itself’ (‘Author’s Note’ to *The Secret Agent*, 6.30–31), so the idea for a short story, ‘Nostromo’, did not become the novel *Nostromo* until Conrad ‘had the first vision of a twilight country which was to become the province of Sulaco’ (7.3–5). For it is at this point that he writes, ‘Such are in very truth the obscure origins of *Nostromo* – the book’ (7–8). In this process of imagining a living country no other person is more important to

<sup>1</sup> Robert Hampson, *Joseph Conrad (Critical Lives)* (2020), p. 93.

<sup>2</sup> Ian Watt, *Joseph Conrad: Nostromo*, Landmarks of World Literature (1988), pp. 3–4.

<sup>3</sup> For further examples, see Brice, II, 293.

the origins of the novel than Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham. Conrad's deep, instinctive friendship with the aristocratic Scottish socialist developed his political thinking so that he could broach the theme of the operation of 'material interests' in a manner fundamentally different from the close-up phantasmagoria of 'Heart of Darkness'. It required more knowledge of history, politics, economics, personages, customs and ways of life beyond Conrad's immediate and vivid encounters that had made up so much of his previous fiction. For this, Cunninghame Graham was eminently well placed: in the 1870s he had made three highly adventurous, if financially unproductive, trips to South America, spending some four years overall in Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil and Paraguay. Surviving typhus and capture by López Jordán's band of gaucho irregulars, he learnt as much about the chaos of civil war as he did about the art of ranching, the cultivation of *yerba mate* and the transport of horses. By the time he befriended Conrad he was a noted parliamentary and public speaker on behalf of the impoverished labouring classes throughout Britain, and a veteran of police rough-handling at the Bloody Sunday demonstration of 13 November 1887 and of his subsequent six-week sentence in Pentonville for unlawful assembly. His political understanding was of long formation and coloured by the anarchic violence of South America, experiences to which, in various ways, he returned until the end of his writing life.<sup>1</sup> Whether or not he was directly introduced to it by 'Don Roberto', Conrad certainly extended his reading of events in South America under Graham's influence (facilitated by membership of the London Library), turning his interests from contemporary Dutch colonization to the legacies of an earlier Spanish colonization in the process. Xavier Brice has shown that when Conrad was about 15,000 words into the novel, probably in late spring or summer 1903, a story 'concerned mostly with Italians' (*Letters*, III, 34) and with a survey for a railway backed by British investment was overtaken by an allied but different narrative of the renovation of a mine and the operation of American venture capital.<sup>2</sup> Such a redirection of focus comes not from anything in Conrad's early formation, but from a newfound attention, stimulated by Graham, to the great new imperialism just coming into view.

<sup>1</sup> For detail, see Cedric Watts and Laurence Davies, *Cunninghame Graham, a Critical Biography* (1979), pp. 14–37 and 274–81.

<sup>2</sup> See Brice, I, 157–60.

The novel's origins include the history and politics inherent in the subject and setting itself. There was much that was pre-existent for Conrad to build a novel upon. Mary Louise Pratt has shown how a written discourse created by those she calls the 'capitalist vanguard' established itself in the first half of the nineteenth century, no longer viewing South America with the eye of the naturalist, as Alexander von Humboldt had done, but rather with an eye to raw materials, trade and opportunities for financial investment.<sup>1</sup> These 'traveller-writers' were the forerunners of those whom Conrad was to read so assiduously during 1902 and 1903, Edward Eastwick's book on Venezuela being the most prominent example. Advertising the continent's openness to 'material interests', they contributed to a situation whereby, 'By the late 1880s several countries ... had become complete economic dependencies of Britain, or rather of the investors in the British Stock Exchange'.<sup>2</sup> E. Bradford Burns suggests that, 'Captivated by foreign political ideologies which bore little relevance to local conditions, the Latin American elite also showed a penchant for economic doctrines more suitable to industrializing Europe than to an underdeveloped New World.'<sup>3</sup> While it would be tendentious to draw this analysis directly from *Nostromo* itself, the comment casts a sharp light in which to see the novel's Blancos.

The futile catastrophe known as the War of the Triple Alliance or the Paraguayan War, 1864–70, gave vivid actuality to Conrad's insight into the continent's national and imperializing tyrannies. The late 1860s saw Paraguay, under its dictator Francisco Solano López, conduct an intensely nationalistic war against its neighbours Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina, pursued until the country was destroyed by famine and the majority of its adult men killed.<sup>4</sup> Cunninghame Graham visited Paraguay shortly after the cessation of the conflict, and it

<sup>1</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (2008).

<sup>2</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, p. 144. For example, James Mudie Spence's two-volume *The Land of Bolivar* (1878) concludes with an open advertisement for investment and immigration. Readers of *Nostromo* would be interested in the discussion of telegraphs and particularly this footnote: 'From a conversation with the manager of the Venezuelan telegraph lines held while a revolution was still raging, I learned that, in spite of the disturbed state of the country, the wires were very seldom cut, or interfered with; perhaps owing to the fact that both the Blues and the Yellows used them' (II, 132).

<sup>3</sup> E. Bradford Burns, *Latin America: A Concise Interpretative History* (1977), p. 114.

<sup>4</sup> Eduardo Galeano, in *Open Veins of Latin America* (1973), offers an opposing account of Solano López as heroically resisting the depredations of free trade, with the Paraguayan people dying at his side: the imperializing tyrannies are Brazil and its backers, British bankers (pp. 208–14).



was under his aegis that Conrad was led to read about it. The war considered as an origin for *Nostromo* turns the picture of South America from one of geography and natural resources towards one of history and politics, and introduces into Conrad's broadly spatial, visualizing imagination the temporal depth of a historical hinterland, under the rule of the fictional Guzman Bento. The illusion of a real history that Conrad imparts to his creation of Costaguana, only parts of which are glancingly alluded to in *Nostromo*, thus finds its origin in the yet more extreme history of Paraguay.

In the 1890s the politics of the region were again in the news, beginning with the Chilean War of 1891, though to claim as one scholar does that 'The essential details of Conrad's political narrative in *Nostromo* are in the *Times*' accounts of the Chilean civil war' necessitates a good deal of creative geographical rearrangement.<sup>1</sup> More certainly, and recorded in his correspondence, the ten-week Spanish American War of 1898 fuelled Conrad's antipathy to US expansionism, which is manifested in the novel in the portrayal of the financier Holroyd. In 1898 Spain lost the last of her Caribbean possessions, Cuba and Puerto Rico, as well as the Philippines; but Conrad seems to have preferred the old Spanish colonialism to the new American imperialism, exclaiming to the strongly pro-Spanish Graham: 'I am afraid however that the thieves shall agree in the Philip[p]ines. The Pity of it. Viva l'España! Anyhow' (*Letters*, II, 81). Graham continued to wage a campaign over South America in the correspondence columns of the *Saturday Review* from 1900 to 1902, and Conrad's responses to him in this formative period for *Nostromo* afford glimpses of the way in which his own scepticism was fortified at this stage of his authorial career by Graham's more politicized brand.

Both Graham and Conrad were highly critical of Britain's role in the Boer War of 1899–1902: 'There is an appalling fatuity in this business,' wrote Conrad (*Letters*, II, 207), while Graham saw the conflict as 'a fight between two burglars'.<sup>2</sup> And they concurred completely about the event that many have maintained provided the direct historical and political model for the fortunes of Sulaco in *Nostromo*, the secession of Panama from Colombia in November 1903. While in *Nostromo* Conrad was imagining the secession of Sulaco from Costaguana, its 'material interests' returning huge profits to its US backer, the sub-

<sup>1</sup> John Saveson, 'Nostromo and the London Times', *Review of English Studies*, 24, no. 93 (1973), 52–8.

<sup>2</sup> Watts and Davies, *Graham, a Critical Biography*, p. 114.

sequent Hay–Bunau-Varilla Treaty was in actuality giving the US all the rights of sovereignty in perpetuity over the Canal Zone in a newly seceded Panama. On 26 December Conrad wrote to Graham, ‘And à propos what do you think of the Yankee Conquistadores in Panama?’ (*Letters*, III, 102). The hostility to US ambitions which Conrad shared with Graham was only strengthened by current events, and also by an introduction from Graham to the Colombian diplomat Santiago Pérez Triana, whose idealism, Hispanic outlook and resolutely anti-US stance in Latin American affairs was expressed in many articles in British newspapers and journals, to which Conrad had access through Graham. Conrad seems to have imbibed much both from his reading and from the acquaintance itself.<sup>1</sup>

The experience of reading *Nostromo* entails intriguing irony: the narration encourages an inward, even sympathetic, view of the Blancos, who are, however, engaged in a political and economic process the author thoroughly disapproves of. In like manner, as one of the novel’s most acute readers notes, the retaking of Sulaco, under the leadership of Barrios, Hernández and Don Pépé, ‘is an event mainly Indian, but the victors are the Blancos’,<sup>2</sup> an irony that would have been appreciated by Cunninghame Graham, and one which sees the discrepancies between what we are apparently being told and what the novel shows us.

## SOURCES

IN AN ANECDOTE recounted in *A Personal Record*, Conrad vividly conveys the absolute absorption required for the creation of his derived yet original South American state. Conrad’s courtesy in allowing the general’s daughter to interrupt his writing meant, ‘The whole world of Costaguana ... men, women, headlands, houses, mountains, town, *campo* (there was not a single brick, stone or grain of sand of its soil I had not placed in position with my own hands); all the history, geography, politics, finance; ... all that had come down crashing about my ears’ (92.18–28). Yet this commitment to material realization was to a considerable extent a creative transformation by Conrad of his *reading*. These literary sources for *Nostromo* are well known, readily available to an interested scholar, and have been discussed in detail by Norman

<sup>1</sup> See Cedric Watts, ed., *Joseph Conrad’s Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham* (1969), pp. 206–9.

<sup>2</sup> Verleun, p. 88.