

## MALAY LEGACIES OF JOSEPH CONRAD: LEGACIES EXPLORED AND UNEXPLORED, EXPLAINED AND UNEXPLAINED<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** A writer's legacy is a complex matter, and Conrad's particularly so, influenced as he was by various factors that included being born a Pole, his career as a merchant seaman, and his becoming a British national. Yet a literary legacy is not fixed, but alters over time, as critics and researchers make further discoveries and advance new thinking. This has been all the more the case with Conrad's Malay fiction, set largely on the periphery of a Dutch colonial possession unfamiliar to many then as now.

A further dimension in considering Conrad's legacy is his consciousness of the particular relationship that existed between his urge to write and those about whom he wrote. In *A Personal Record* he wrote of "that spirit of piety toward all things human" to describe the spirit that governed what was in effect a sense of responsibility toward his subjects, defining as a form of reverence his moral responsibility in writing about his fellow human beings.

This essay looks at two individuals who have especially illuminated Conrad's legacy, both the legacy that he created and that which he received. Harold Gray was a chance visitor and enquirer in Tanjung Redeb, while the Indonesian scholar, G. J. Resink, not only explored and explained more than had been previously understood of Conrad's legacy, including Conrad's sources, but validated the faithfulness and accuracy of Conrad's representation of Malay life. The essay will also examine something of Conrad's defence of humanity regardless of colour or creed, and his pioneering re-direction of seeing eastern civilization from a Eurocentric point of view to seeing it from an Asian- or Indo-centric viewpoint.

**Keywords:** Almayer, Florence Clemens, Harold Gray, R. Haverschmidt, Tuan Jim, Lingard, Multatuli, G. J. Resink, Berau, colonial, Dutch East Indies, fictive vanishing point, legacy, Malay, piety, Tanjung Redeb

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A writer's legacy is a complex matter. This is particularly so in the case of Conrad, whose character and writing, and hence his legacy, are informed by many different influences. Born a Pole, an inheritance that is strongly in our minds here in Cracow where we are glad to be in the centenary year of his death, to this foundation of his character were added his seafaring and British citizenship. Yet a literary legacy is not a simple given, but alters with the times as a two-way phenomenon as literary criticism and research throw additional light on both writer and writing and the involved relationship between the two. The varieties of legacy mentioned in this essay's title arise all the more in the case of Conrad's Malay fiction, fiction set largely in the Dutch East Indies, a colonial possession and a culture unfamiliar to many readers at the time of the publication of the books as well as now.<sup>2</sup>

Focusing on Conrad's Malay fiction, comprising a third of his fictional writings, this essay will examine certain aspects of how our understanding of Conrad's legacy developed, looking at two individuals who, in very different ways, have contributed to this understanding. Finally, it will suggest why this part of his legacy is such an important aspect of his overall cultural and moral contribution to our thinking.

Starting with some necessarily extended quotation, let us turn to the first of our two individuals, who wrote in 1938:

It was a Dutch chart, naturally, but right where he put his finger I saw the words "Oversteek Lingard". [...] I asked the Skipper what the name signified and he said that "Oversteek" meant "passage" but he had no idea as to what the Lingard part of it meant.<sup>3</sup>

That afternoon we reached our destination – a little settlement on the river bank called Tandjong Redeb. We were to unload some machinery for a coal mine that the Dutch were exploiting some miles inland, and we were also to pick up some more rattan cane and some more *trassi* [a fish paste]. There was nothing to go ashore for. There were a couple of dozen straggling wooden houses along the river bank, maybe two Stores, and a few bungalows obviously occupied by Dutch Government officials. If that was where Almayer lived, no wonder he went nuts.

As soon as we had got a gangway over the side, an elderly European came aboard to see the Skipper. As he passed me he greeted me in Dutch, but the only word I know in that language is "verdomme," and I'm not too sure what it means myself. When he had finished with the Skipper he had to pass me again, so I stopped him and asked him, in English, to join me in a *pahit*. He smiled and shook his head and replied in German, saying that he did not drink, and that he

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<sup>2</sup> For a full-length study of the complex cultural representations and varied cultural backgrounds as well as of the important commercial element present in Conrad's Asian fiction (i.e., including his Malay fiction), see Andrew Francis, *Culture and Commerce in Conrad's Asian Fiction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> "Oversteek" correctly means "crossing." A chart of "Lingard's Passage, as surveyed by HNMS [Her Netherlands Majesty's Ship] *Van Doorn*, February/March 1918 *Public Record Office, The Hague, The Netherlands*" is given by Ron Visser in "An Out-of-the-Way Place called Berau," *The Conradian* 18, no. 1 (Autumn 1993), pp. 36-47 (p. 40). The chart shows "Baak van Lingard" (Lingard's Beacon). This beacon marked the place of the crossing that needed to be made for safe navigation. "Lingard's Cross" is similarly mentioned in Great Britain, Hydrographic Office, Admiralty, *Eastern Archipelago*, 4 parts, first edition 1890-1927. Part II, comp. Rear-Admiral J. P. Maclear, *Eastern Archipelago, Part II (Western Part). Comprising the South-East Coast of Sumatra, Java, The Islands East of Java, The South and East Coasts of Borneo, and Celebes Island* ([1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1893), p. 340.

could not speak English. My German is about on a par with my Dutch, so I asked him if he spoke French. His face lit up as he replied, “But of course I speak French. It is my own language. I am a Belgian.” He hadn’t had a chance to speak his own language for years, so he was delighted with a chance to talk [*sic*] it again, even with me. He told me that he had been there for over fifty years. He had first come out to Borneo as a young man, when he had hired out as a mercenary in the Dutch Army. After completing his military service, he had returned to Borneo and had lived there ever since.

[...]

Then I asked him if he had ever heard of a guy named Almayer, and he replied “Why, yes, I knew him well! That was his house over there, where you see the second bungalow. It was a very big house, and we called it “La Folie.”

[...]

Conrad changed his own name from Korzeniowski to Conrad, so a little thing like changing Olmeyer to Almayer must have been duck soup to him.

[...]

I asked him a lot of questions about Lingard, Nina, Dain and Abdulla, but he could tell me little. He remembered Abdulla, but the other names meant little to him. Old Tom Lingard was gone before his time, but his face lit up when I asked if he had ever heard of Lord Jim. “Of course I knew him” he replied, “but we called him Tuan Jim. When Tuan Jim was sick and poor, it was I who paid his passage to Soerabaya. He died there in hospital.”<sup>4</sup>

The author is Harold Gray. He was not a Conrad scholar, as indeed you can tell from his appealing colloquial language – I have always thought it would be good to include in a Conrad conference paper Gray’s words “no wonder he went nuts” and “duck soup.” But there is a serious reason for remembering his visit to Tanjung Redeb. Harold Gray was almost certainly the first European with an interest in Conrad to visit Tanjung Redeb after Conrad’s death and to report on what he found, someone who brought to historical life the people and places on which Conrad built much of his Malay fiction. He was also the first specifically to identify Tanjung Redeb with *Almayer’s Folly* as well as the real-life Olmeijer with Conrad’s fictional Almayer.<sup>5</sup> This plain-speaking English businessman was an employee of an American company, collecting jungle and sea products on a small Dutch vessel. His account of his visit was published in 1938 in the house magazine of Sarawak Oilfields, Ltd., a subsidiary of Royal Dutch Shell, and because of the significance of Gray’s contribution to Conrad studies, it was duly noted in *The Times* only two months later.<sup>6</sup> His discoveries followed his meeting the ship’s captain while the ship was navigating through the

<sup>4</sup> F. Harold Gray, “That Day,” *Mirage* (Miri, Sarawak) 10, no. 37 (June 1938), pp. 3-5 (4-5).

<sup>5</sup> Dr. R. Broersma had earlier identified Lingard’s association with Berau and with *Almayer’s Folly* and considered it probable that Conrad had visited Berau on his journeys. Broersma also recorded that Olmeijer was acting as agent for Lingard & Co. *Handel en Bedrijf in Zuid- en Oost-Borneo* [Trade and Commerce in South and East Borneo] (’s-Gravenhage: G. Naeff, 1927), p. 229, footnote 1.

<sup>6</sup> (Anonymous), “Almayer and Lord Jim: In the Tracks of Joseph Conrad,” *The Times*, 22 August 1938, p. 13.

estuary of the River Pantai and then meeting, in Tanjung Redeb, a Belgian mining engineer. These were meetings of individuals with situations and occupations worthy of a Conrad novel: a ship's captain of a Borneo coasting vessel; a British company representative journeying to the mysterious Borneo; and a Belgian mining engineer living up-river who was formerly a mercenary with the Dutch East Indies army.

The word "Lingard" on the chart may not have meant anything to the captain, but it meant something to the observant Gray. The mining engineer, not identified by Gray, was R. Haverschmidt, a name known to Conrad scholars from various biographies of Conrad. Gray had only a slight knowledge of Conrad, gleaned from a battered copy of *Almayer's Folly* that he had found on board in the captain's locker, but he was curious about Conrad's Berau characters, sufficiently so to ask Haverschmidt questions about what had become of Conrad's real-life characters. And although it was fifty years after Conrad had voyaged to Berau, some of his questions still brought forth answers. We can say that Gray explored some of the unexplored complex legacy that Conrad left; perhaps only a beginning of these explorations, but a contribution of significance nonetheless. Gray was thus a pioneer when he visited Tanjung Redeb and painted for us a brief but very real picture of what the settlement was like, figuratively rubbing shoulders with Tuan Jim and Almayer's "Folly," exploring and explaining Conrad's foundational Malay locus. And he was the first of the relatively few Conrad scholars who have made that journey to Tanjung Redeb, some others since being the Dutchman Ron Visser, the German dramaturge Horst Laube, the journalist and travel writer Gavin Young, and Alan Heywood Kenny, the second editor of *The Conradian*.<sup>7</sup>

We now move on to our second individual.

One aspect of Conrad's Malay fiction that we all know well, but which it is worth reminding ourselves of, is that in setting *Almayer's Folly*, *An Outcast of the Islands*, and *Lord Jim* geographically or topographically in Tanjung Redeb, Conrad isolated his characters and their own legacies from the experience and knowledge of virtually all his readers. Conrad in these three novels places their locations – the first two in Sambir and *Lord Jim's* in Patusan – out of our reach: for example, "three hundred miles beyond the end of telegraph cables and mail-boat lines" and "thirty miles of river from Sambir to the gem-like islands of the estuary."<sup>8</sup> The communities comprise settlers of various ethnic origins, including the tiny minority of Europeans, with communal histories as short-lived as the length of time the immigrant inhabitants have lived there. And even though the Dayaks of the interior provide a glimpse of permanence and more extensive history in Borneo, they only flicker across the pages, main-

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<sup>7</sup> Visser, "An Out-of-the-Way Place;" Horst Laube, *Zwischen den Flüssen: Reisen zu Joseph Conrad* [Between the Rivers: Travels to Joseph Conrad] (Frankfurt am Main: Syndikat, 1982); Gavin Young, *In Search of Conrad* (London: Hutchinson, 1991). No account of Kenny's visit can be traced, but in a private conversation I was informed that he delivered a paper about his visit, accompanied by many photographs, at a conference held by the Joseph Conrad Society (UK).

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1946), p. 282; Joseph Conrad, *Almayer's Folly* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1947), p. 36. All quotations from Conrad's works are taken from Dent's Present Collected Edition (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1946-1955).

ly as transient traders, contributing to the sense of the interior being an unknowable country. It is as if Conrad has created in this community a fictive vanishing point, a point where known existence and culture are on the edge and at which we are compelled to look all the more closely.

As is evident in the article by Harold Gray, this distancing to a point of near-disappearance is partly cultural and partly geographical: Gray describes the extreme physical discomfort of being in the region as well as his acute sense of the captain and himself being the only two Europeans on board, their companions on deck being “a dozen native passengers and about a hundred live pigs” (p. 3); he feels that in this settlement with which he cannot feel any connection there is “nothing to go ashore for” (p. 4); the captain’s ignorance of Lingard’s navigational legacy denotes a truly fictive vanishing point. The political context contributes to this vanishing, insofar as east Borneo at the time of Conrad’s visits was still a self-governing region under its sultans, with Dutch officials spread only thinly, and with Dutch rule aided by mercenaries, one of whom has become almost lost to view in his adopted colonial place of residence. In this territory the Dutch are largely, we might say, only ever over the horizon in Conrad’s settlements except when a rare visit is made, as in the case of the official Navy “*Commissie*” (p. 44) visit in *Almayer’s Folly*, albeit one tellingly comprising only low-ranking naval officers.

These cultural, geographical, and political distances, although evident in Conrad’s Malay fiction, gain in significance and fictional achievement as they are studied by scholars. Such research can help explain the underlying characteristics of an obscure riverine settlement and their translation into the fictional community with which we are familiar. One such scholar, who explores what previously has often been unexplored and who explains it, is the critic G. J. Resink, who was born in 1911 and who died in 1997. Writing on Conrad in Dutch and occasionally in Indonesian, and fired by an admiration of Conrad for his literary achievements and his historical accuracy, Resink writes from a unique standpoint in Conrad studies, that of an Indonesian citizen with a deep historical appreciation of the Dutch East Indies, or, as he would put it, of Indonesia. It was, after all, the country in which he had grown up, with a Dutch father and with a mother of Javanese descent, both of whom were passionately concerned with Indonesian culture. A professor of Modern and Diplomatic History at the University of Indonesia in Jakarta, as well as a poet of considerable renown, Resink spoke Javanese, Indonesian, and Dutch, with a good knowledge of English and of European literature and music, and wrote fifteen essays about Conrad’s Malay fiction between the late 1950s to the early 1970s. The problem has been that most of those essays in Dutch, and the one in Indonesian, have not been translated into English and thus have been unavailable to most Conrad scholars, although translations will hopefully appear next year.<sup>9</sup>

Resink focused on several themes in his essays. He was particularly concerned with correcting the colonial myth that Indonesia had been colonised for some three centuries. The truth was that Dutch domination came much more slowly, and could

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<sup>9</sup> “*A Lasting Fascination: Selected Essays by G. J. Resink on Joseph Conrad’s Indonesia*, ed. and transl. Andrew Francis and Elsa Strietman, with one essay transl. from Indonesian by Andrew Francis (forthcoming).

only be said to have been completed in the twentieth century, although even then the sultanate of Aceh in north Sumatra continued its resistance. This view is allied to Resink's emphasis on what were called the Outer Possessions – where Conrad largely set his Malay fiction – which is to say the territories ruled by or associated with the Dutch in the East Indies that lay beyond Java, which was the core of Dutch rule and influence. Thus, Conrad avoids writing a simply colonial-centric fiction and presents instead a hybrid culture and polity, one in which his characters have a much wider agency that reflected the reality of the historical Dutch-Indonesian situation.

Resink was also very conscious of the work done before him regarding the identification of Conrad's sources for his Malay fiction. He admired, and frequently refers to, Florence Clemens' doctoral thesis of 1937 at The Ohio State University on Conrad's sources, at long last published in 2023 in *Conrad Studies*, edited by John Peters and Gene Moore. Clemens having identified James Brooke's diaries and Alfred Wallace's *The Malay Archipelago* as major sources, to these Resink adds Belcher's 1848 *Narrative of the Voyage of H.M.S. Samarang during the Years 1843-46*, as well as Captain Marryat, his son Frank, C. J. Temminck, and Horace St. John, all of which have explained many more of Conrad's references.

Another theme of Resink was that in Conrad's time there were many degrees of independence and dependence among Indonesia's states and kingdoms. Indeed, there was no Indonesia until the twentieth century, but a piecemeal assortment of over 200 constituent kingdoms lying within what the government of the Dutch East Indies declared to be its own realm or at least its sphere of influence. This explains some of the complex background to the sultanates in the Berau region in Conrad's time and the shifting allegiances of the settlers that he depicts there.

Resink's breadth of cultural view – which led him to write an essay on Conrad and Debussy and another on Conrad and Rimbaud, a widening of Conrad's legacy – is evident in his arguing in a number of the essays that it was very likely that Conrad had read Multatuli's famous work of Dutch, and world, literature, *Max Havelaar*. This novel was first published in 1860, and in English translation in 1868, and is a crucial text not only for Conrad studies but also for the study of post-colonialism. Although the case for Conrad's having read the book, despite Resink's and other scholars' considerable efforts, remains unproven, the cultural and literary similarities between this book and Conrad's Malay fiction that Resink brings to our attention are significant and throw light on telling parallels between the writings of these two important figures.

Not least in forming the breadth of Resink's cultural view is his participation in an international network of scholars ranging from, amongst others, Hans van Marle and Bert Paasman in the Netherlands, Charles Boxer in England, and Andrzej Braun and Zdzisław Najder in Poland. Indeed, he came to Warsaw during a period of study leave in 1962-1963. In addition to providing insights into the Dutch and Indonesian cultural background to Conrad's Malay fiction, Resink's essays also serve to widen the frame of our reading of this fiction through the extensive range of references to Indonesian history as well as to a range of Indonesian and Dutch figures, whether academic, literary, political, church or military. This material is otherwise little known

to most Conrad scholars. Insofar as Resink's writing and references tell us more about the wider Asian and global reception of Conrad – that is to say, through Resink as an historian and critic of both Indonesian and Dutch origin – the essays amount to a breakthrough in how we may, and should, read the Malay fiction in a more informed manner, as well as providing something of a distinctively Asian reception of Conrad as a writer. Furthermore, Resink's response as an historian and critic is humane and sensitive to the human issues portrayed by Conrad, issues often connected to the colonialism and varied cultures present in the Malay fiction, and this is reflected through Resink's standpoint, one that is both European and Indonesian and not simply eurocentric.

A final theme that it is important to recognise is Resink's firmly-stated view that Conrad was an anti-imperialist.<sup>10</sup> In these days when readings of Conrad's works have sometimes sought to portray him as racist, partly because of treating Conrad's characters' views as Conrad's own, this is a crucial assertion, coming as it does from an Indonesian citizen who is able to read Conrad through an unrivalled knowledge of the history and politics of Indonesia, a knowledge that can speak for a south-east Asian response to Conrad's writing – a response, we may also say, on behalf of the region's colonized. So, to return to the terms of the essay's title, we may say that Resink explored much that had been unexplored, and, with his unique cultural standpoint, was able to explain much that had been unexplained in the legacy of Conrad.

Conrad's legacy has been more fully understood and contextualised by these two very different contributors, Gray and Resink, enlarging our global sensibilities and our literary sympathies around Conrad. Harold Gray, an unlikely participant in so many ways in our studies of Conrad, was nevertheless a pioneer. And Resink can perhaps serve for us today in Cracow as a symbol of the drawing together of international interest in Conrad that Conrad's own internationalism invites.

In 1984 Juliet McLauchlan published an essay in *The Polish Review* on Conrad's piety in *A Personal Record*.<sup>11</sup> Piety is a term hardly used in current thinking about Conrad, but the notion of piety – that is, reverence and dutifulness – is key to Conrad's relationship with those about whom he wrote. It is especially significant with regard to those historical and fictional characters in the Malay fiction about whom Conrad was creating a legacy and from whom he received one. Juliet McLauchlan quotes Conrad writing in *A Personal Record*:

I can honestly say that it is a sentiment akin to piety which prompted me to render in words assembled with conscientious care the memory of things far distant and of men who had lived

and furthermore that his first novel had:

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<sup>10</sup> For a fuller discussion of this issue and of postcolonialism studies in relation to Conrad, see Andrew Francis, "Postcolonial Conrad," in *The New Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*, ed. J. H. Stape (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 147-159. A significant contribution to this area is Terry Collits, *Postcolonial Conrad: Paradoxes of Empire* (London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Juliet McLauchlan, "'Piety' in Joseph Conrad's 'A Personal Record,'" *The Polish Review* 29, no. 3 (1984), pp. 11-23. Juliet McLauchlan was the first chair of The Joseph Conrad Society (UK), founded in 1973.

a moral character, for why should the memory of these beings, seen in their obscure sun-bathed existence demand to express itself in the shape of a novel except on the ground of that mysterious fellowship which unites in a community of hopes and fears all the dwellers on the earth?<sup>12</sup>

Conrad spells out in these words a compulsion to preserve and to respect, to create a legacy of moral, pious recollection. This legacy is of a part with his defence of humanity regardless of colour or creed, and his pioneering re-direction of his readers to see an eastern civilization from a multicultural point of view.

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<sup>12</sup> McLauchlan, “‘Piety’ in Joseph Conrad’s ‘A Personal Record,’” p. 12 (*A Personal Record*, pp. 9-10).