

REVIEW OF
A HISTORICAL GUIDE TO JOSEPH CONRAD
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This *Historical Guide to Joseph Conrad* edited by John G. Peters consists of essays presenting Conrad in the historical, cultural and social contexts in which he lived and wrote. It invites readers to immerse themselves in Conrad's fascinating world and "by the power of the written word, to make [them] hear, to make [them] feel" and "to make [them] see" the writer and his works in a particular historical setting.

Cedric T. Watts in "Joseph Conrad's life" claims that the reader can appreciate Conrad – who was an English writer – only by understanding Conrad as a Pole and as a seafarer. Explaining Conrad's choice of themes, such as loneliness, tragic death and self-sacrifice – and also his exploration of the ideas of loyalty and treachery, as well as conflicts between honour, love and the law – Watts points to the writer's experiences in childhood. He examines Conrad's decisions and discusses his reasons for leaving Poland, travelling to Marseilles and choosing to live the life of a sailor. Watts then outlines the problem of Conrad's duality. He presents the phases of Conrad's literary career, discussing his works and the literary criticism they have generated. Commenting on Conrad's personal life and his writing, he gives an overview of the writer's milieu. Thanks to Watts' effortless style the reader makes the acquaintance of Conrad and his contemporaries from within, as it were, getting to know various opinions, attitudes, comments and approaches.

Mark D. Larabee for his part examines Conrad's experiences connected with maritime tradition as they are reflected in his letters. Larabee does not concentrate on the biographical affinities between Conrad's life and his works, but instead presents the values which Conrad acquired during his maritime career. He discusses the issues of trade, fidelity and craft.

By giving a detailed account of the activities of Britain's Merchant Service in relation to global seaborne commerce at the turn of the century, Larabee shows that trade exerted a certain influence on Conrad's fiction. He discusses the historical routes and the cargoes which were carried at that time, comparing them with those described in Conrad's novels.

Larabee claims that the mariner's fidelity in Conrad's writing has four objects: tradition, professional competence, shipmates and the ship. Conradian fidelity is con-

nected with the seaman's craft. Conrad observed the separation of effort from craftsmanship which resulted from a lowering of the technical requirements for work on steamers. Conrad not only noticed affinities between the technical and moral demands of the craft, but also endeavoured to preserve tradition in the face of historical changes.

Larabee argues that Conrad's observation and experience of human nature during his maritime career provided him with material for his books and also taught him the importance of precision in writing.

Joyce Piell Wexler in "Joseph Conrad and the Literary Marketplace" describes Conrad's connections with his readers and commercial publishers. She claims that on the one hand Conrad endeavoured to maintain his artistic standards, while on the other he wanted to widen the readership of his novels. Conrad's wish to have a broader readership was twofold: it was a financial necessity and also a feeling that it was important to reach a larger group of readers than just a small coterie. Wexler discusses Conrad's relationship with Edward Garnett – his friend, "ideal reader," mentor, critic and agent – and also his early publishers: T. Fisher Unwin and William Blackwood.

She notes that Conrad's career stabilized in 1899, when James B. Pinker became his literary agent and took charge of his finances, and argues that Conrad – living on advances – was writing under financial pressure. He could not meet his deadlines (as in the case of *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*). Nevertheless, Conrad achieved success in the literary marketplace. As Wexler remarks: "Thanks to his mastery of the literary marketplace, Conrad's writing career validated the ideals that his fiction embodies: fidelity and solidarity, being true to oneself and true to others" (p. 98).

Allan H. Simmons in "Conrad and Politics" outlines the historical and political circumstances in which Conrad lived and wrote. He presents Conrad's Polish heritage: his childhood memories of national mourning and the role they played in his life. Simmons chronicles the history of nineteenth-century Europe – and in particular its revolutionary movements – relating historical events to Poland and thus to Conrad's life and letters. He also discusses British politics at the time when Conrad entered British Society, as well as Conrad's own political sympathies.

Simmons then goes on to give an account of Britain's foreign policy, colonialism and the Boer War, as all these exerted a strong influence on Conrad's fiction. He argues that the writer's experiences in the Congo allowed him to see the reality of colonial excess. Conrad presented his views on "the White Man's burden" in "An Outpost of Progress" and *Heart of Darkness*.

Simmons discusses Conrad's major achievements: his political novels – *Nostromo*, *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* – which show the maturity of Conrad's political vision. He then outlines Conrad's reaction to the First World War and his interest in Polish affairs. In 1916 Conrad wrote a memorandum entitled "A Note on the Polish Problem." Simmons concludes by describing the last phase of Conrad's literary career and discussing the criticism generated by Conrad's political works.

Christopher GoGwilt in his essay claims that Conrad's works can be seen not only as an indispensable guide to colonial history at the turn of the century, but also as a guide to present and future forms of colonialism and imperialism. The most relevant and historically significant context, according to GoGwilt, is the one in which Conrad wrote. Although his fiction is not a historical record of facts, Conrad's peripheral vision of colonialism allows us to see his works as a guide to colonial history. GoGwilt illustrates his discussion of this peripheral vision by invoking the remote setting of "Sambir" (*Almayer's Folly*). He also examines Conrad's use of English from a colonial perspective.

Andrea White in turn presents Joseph Conrad's works against the background of the beginnings of Anglo-American literary modernism. She discusses Conrad's uniqueness on the English literary scene at the turn of the century and suggests that what Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski brought to English literature was above all novelty. She then goes on to consider the artistic issue of "rendering consciousness" and discusses strategies such as the stream of consciousness, the inner monologue and free indirect discourse – all of which are employed to narrate and present individual points of view – and outlines the narrative strategies used by Conrad, as well as other modernists. According to White, the narrator was the focal point of Conrad's experimentation in the field of fiction.

White also discusses the modernist treatment of time and space. The ideas of Henri Bergson and Albert Einstein's theory of relativity influenced modernists, who experimented with the relativity of time and space in their writing. Conrad's use of time is also modernist: he expresses the conflict between "private" and "public" time.

White argues that Conrad wanted his readers to be active and to participate in constructing meaning. She uses the term "modernist difficulty" in discussing problems encountered by modernist writers who wanted to "render consciousness" by inviting their readers to be active. Modernist writers explained and justified this innovation by writing prefaces, essays, explanatory notes and comments on their works and in this regard Conrad was no exception. White concludes by saying that Conrad's works should be read in a new way – like the works of Woolf, Joyce and Mansfield.

John G. Peters in his contribution discusses the most important and influential critical works that have been written on Conrad. He reviews these in chronological order, commenting on Conrad's literary reputation and the various approaches to his life and letters. Peters observes that apart from post-colonial, post-structural and gender studies, there are developments heading in other directions: "Conrad's works have provided seemingly endless materials for comment, whether biographical/historical, psychological, post-structural, post-colonial or otherwise" (p. 11).

Two additional bonuses of this volume are a detailed and up-to-date bibliography (appended to the essay by John G. Peters) and an illustrated Conrad chronology.

This *Historical Guide* is an indispensable tool for students and scholars alike. Newcomers are given an introduction to Conrad's life and work and are also provided with historical background information about the period, while scholars are given an opportunity to see Conrad's works from a new perspective – and perhaps to read Conrad anew.