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BOOK PAGE edited by GERALD BARRY

# Supreme teller of seafarers

by H. E. BATES

IT is 80 years or more since a Polish seaman named Jozef Teodor Konrad Nalecs Korzeniowski, a shortish man with "a dark retreating face with a very carefully trimmed and pointed beard, a trouble-wrinkled forehead and very troubled dark eyes," first brought to English literature a flavour that was something of a cross between sea-wind, salt, far, spice islands and the inside of a ship chandler's shop fermenting under the torrid heat of an Eastern port.

The long-named Pole had been wise enough to shorten and anglicise his name to Joseph Conrad, the centenary of whose birth we celebrate this week.

Among the first people to be excited by the entirely new aromatic quality of a writer who had learned to read English long before he wrote it, and who thus always pronounced it with the thickest of accents, was H. G. Wells, who justified the enthusiasm of Conrad's earliest sponsors, Edward Garnett and John Galsworthy, by energetically applauding "Almayer's Folly," Conrad's first novel, in *The English Review*.

Conrad was then a man of almost forty: a comparatively late starter in a race always notable for a high number of precocious entrants.

The reason was that he had been for ten years a working sailor at sea.

## arch-apostle

A passionate desire for seafaring had taken him originally from his unhappy native Poland to Marseilles, a city in which, as he wrote later to Galsworthy, "I did begin life." It's the place where the puppy opened his eyes, and thereafter over most of the world, more especially to those steaming Eastern ports, islands and rivers he described so well, and thankfully not for the last time, in "Almayer's Folly."

The lives of writers are often as inspiring as yesterday's potato parings; but there is something like a touch of romantic destiny in the history of a young man who found himself unable to resist the call of the sea, became first mate on a ship in which there happened to be a French and of man's infinitely ancient elemental struggle against it.

## chosen language

It was an astonishing stroke of luck that he chose English as the medium through which to express these things.

French, which he spoke perfectly, without a trace of Polish accent, and wrote with discrimination, would seem to have been his far more natural choice, but Conrad had been completely seduced by English, by the sheer appeal of the language... its freedom, its simple and unforeseen accord of its own emotional nature with its own, and he had been wise to perceive that French "is crystallised in the form of its syntax, and therefore more exacting and less appealing."

It was not long before Conrad wrote with a fearless, inexhaustible plasticity of English, became the sort of writer who nowadays in our contemporary world of duflcoasters gifted with a genius

Joseph Conrad was born 100 years ago this week. We present this tribute to his work by an outstanding story-teller of today

for making literature taste of paraffin oil, is deemed to be unpopular.

He had the effrontery to become a teller of tales.

More adult than Stevenson, blessed with better taste than Kipling, as far removed from the Jane Austen of whom he asked, "What is it all about?" as a flamboyant tree from a dead-nettle, he unfolded in language often complex, persistently compelling and as burningly sensuous and haunting in atmosphere as a tropical shore at night, the immortal "Youth," "Heart of Darkness," "Lord Jim," "Typhoon," and the sinewy, taut "Nigger of the Narcissus."

It is true to say, I think, that he did not always write well. Complexities of style, endlessly perambulating, learnt after the manner of Henry James, not infrequently put him into an astonishing tangle of verbal torture and there is a story of his called "The Return" which I rate as possibly the great, hopelessly unchallengeable unreadable in the language.

It is true, that George Moore sneered at him for being inept but—what was being inept but—what was reading a second-hand

and scraps of Henry

James, but he nevertheless remains, by any standard, a spell-binder.

Spell—if you seek a word-label to pin on Conrad at this particular moment of celebration, more than thirty years after his death—I think this is it. "Those who know my work best," he once wrote, or in words to that effect, "know that my convictions rest on the simplest things."

## bitter sea

Wells maintained that the very richness of his prose, with its "fine, fresh, careful, slightly exotic quality" blinded "criticism to the essentially sentimental and melodramatic quality of the stories he told," but Wells, too, admitted the genius that took as its favourite theme man's struggle to hammer out his own destiny, his elemental conflict against nature, against "the simple terror of strange places," against "relentless sunlight and skies as merciless and hard as gems, and above all against "the good strong sea," as Conrad himself called it, "the salt bitter sea."

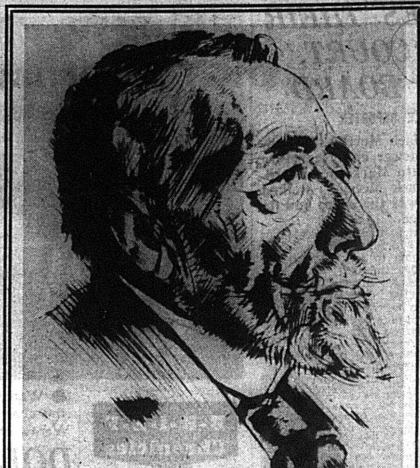
How odd it is that we, the English, with the sea betraying every second of our living and history as persistently as the rain permeates our earth, should have produced so few great writers of the sea and that one of the greatest of them—there are still those who would say the greatest—should be a man from Cracow.

It is a stroke of chance, I think, not likely to be repeated a second time. [Copyright]

SOME CONRAD READING

Unwin call *The Sea-Dreamer* by Gerard John Aubrey (1933) a "definitive biography." It does not deserve such an absolute label, but it is informative with copious extracts from letters and other writings.

Among the Conrad reprints are *Westward* (Everyman, 2s. 6d.), *Victory* (Windsor, 2s. 6d.), *Lord Jim* (Oxford, 8s. 6d.), *Sea Stories* (Mariner, 10s.), *Library* (Hart-Davis, 2s. 6d.) and *Unwritten Eyes* (Penguin, 3s. 6d.).



## Joseph Conrad, 1857-1924

This etching of Conrad is by Walter Tittle and can be seen in the National Portrait Gallery in London

# Bomb-tossers take courage

by JOHN RAYMOND

*The Bombs of Orsini*, by Michael St. John, Packer, Secker & Warburg, 25s.

I MUST confess to an addiction for revolutionaries. Though I have known several extremists in my life—Communists, nihilists, men who fought with the late Roy Campbell in Spain, or performed relief work on the other side with Mr. Stephen Spender—I have never kept company with a genuine assassin, bomb-thrower, or conspirator.

The nearest I can boast is my friendship with that inimitable Left-wing agitator Mr. Claud Cockburn—the man who once paralysed the Age of Baldwin and almost halted King George V's Jubilee procession by unfolding a banner strung across Fleet Street bearing the legend "Thirty Years of Hunger and War."

## roll-call

The great assassin is a type by himself. Belloc, who wrote a famous ballade of great heretics—Tolstoy, Hume, Nietzsche and John Huss—would have made splendid roll-call of the political criminals.

It can be certain he would not have left out Felice Orsini, who on January 14, 1858, threw a bomb at the Emperor Napoleon III and his wife Eugénie on their way to the Paris Opera, killing eight people, including a young boy, and wounding 150 of the escort party.

## weird bunch

The emperor escaped with a scratch on the nose. Orsini

who had showed such gifts of courage and administration, found himself the executor of a daring, brutal and senseless crime. Yet one incidental merit of Mr. St. John Packer's book is that it explains how this piece of cruel folly paradoxically helped the Italian cause at a critical moment. As such, his account is an encouragement to all bomb-throwers.

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