



'Well, sir, you are a lucky man!' Joseph Conrad's first command, the barque *Otago*, which he took when the previous captain died at sea en route from Bangkok. By the time the *Otago* reached Singapore, a voyage of 800 miles, the whole company except Conrad and the cook was down with fever. It was then that he discovered that his predecessor had sold almost all the ship's supply of quinine – an experience told in his stories 'The Shadow-Line' and 'Falk'.

INTRODUCTION

Philip Marsden

FOR THE BEST PART of twenty years – from his late teens until the age of thirty-seven – Joseph Conrad was a mariner. In 1874, he arrived in Marseilles from Poland, a dreamy orphan, his head full of the literature of adventure and exploration. ‘The principal thing was to get away,’ he wrote – and he had long ago decided that the way to do it was on ships. His elders considered it ‘a stupid obstinacy or a fantastic caprice’. But Marseilles did exactly what Conrad hoped it would. It allowed him to shake off the land-locked constraints of his upbringing, and offered a route out into the wide world. It gave him the sea.

He began by sailing with the pilots who manoeuvred ships in and out of the Vieux Port. Within two years he was crossing the Atlantic. He ran guns into Colombia, to the Carlist rebels in Spain. He was shipwrecked, flung overboard, blown up, crushed by a falling spar, laid low by illness. He fell in love, twice. He was injured in a duel (or attempted suicide, depending on who you believe). He rode out gales around Cape Horn, cowered beneath tropical storms, drifted for weeks on glassy seas. He walked thirty-six days up the Congo to take command of a river steamer. He began his career as an ordinary seaman and ended as a qualified master mariner. On October 17 1893, as he recalled in *Last Essays* (1926), he was discharged from the full-rigged clipper *Torrens* in London. ‘I took a long look from the quay at that last of ships I ever had under my care, and, stepping round the corner of a tall warehouse, parted from her for ever, and at the same time stepped . . . out of my sea life altogether.’

Few literary lives have divided so sharply between phases of action

and letters; from then on, Conrad was a writer. He lived quietly with his wife and two sons. Year by year, failing health slowed him. He rented a series of houses, always in south-east England, always in the country. One was Pent Farm in Kent – a pretty, red-brick house where he wrote *The Mirror of the Sea* during 1904 and 1905, as well as *Heart of Darkness* (1899), *Lord Jim* (1900) and *The Secret Agent* (1907). In a letter to a Polish cousin, he described its aspect: ‘From my window I can see farm buildings and if I lean out and look to the right I see the valley of the Stour, which rises so to speak, behind the third hedge from the farmyard . . . The colouring of the country shows yellow and pale brown tints among which can be discerned in the distance emerald-green meadows. You don’t hear a sound except the panting and sniffing of the London-Dover express trains.’

Over half of Conrad’s stories and novels drew directly on his years of sea-roving, which gave him an endless source of exotic, first-hand material (to Conrad the exile, every port he sailed from and into was foreign). It made him, said one critic in the *Saturday Review* in 1958, ‘rich beyond the most avaricious dreams of desk-bound novelists with only their inventive powers to serve them.’ The desk-bound Henry James wrote to him, envying ‘the prodigy of your past experiences . . . No-one has *known* – for intellectual use – the things you know.’ Conrad stands at the head of that line of male twentieth-century writers – Hemingway, Greene, Naipaul, Chatwin – who placed a mask of fiction over their own overseas adventures.

But for Conrad fiction failed to describe one bulwark of his shipboard life – his own ‘great passion’ for the sea. *The Mirror of the Sea*, originally published as a series of essays in newspapers and magazines, was the attempt to correct that. ‘For twenty years I had lived like a hermit with my passion! Beyond the line of the sea horizon the world for me did not exist as assuredly as it does not exist for the mystics who take refuge on the tops of high mountains.’

In Conrad’s stories the sea is background and setting, dramatic context. Here in one of his only works of non-fiction, he confronts it

head-on. Anyone who has ever been to sea, out of sight of land, spent days watching the flat horizon and the ceaseless shifts of swells beneath the hull, and who during that time has pondered on the sheer strangeness of it all, will identify with Conrad's urge to grapple with its truths.

He writes of ships and seamanship, the techniques and technology of sailing, the weather, the briny characters he encountered, of the foibles of his shipmates and some of the scrapes they all got into. It is by no means even, nor held together by a consistent narrative arc. But it is sustained by the overall scale of his intention, by the recalled intensity of his early years and by the translucent depths of his writing. What might have been a prosaic recounting of nautical practice is raised here, in the best passages, to the level of parable.

'He who loves the sea loves the ship's routine.' So we have at the very beginning, the pattern of a long voyage, the psychology of the 'offing', of leaving the land. He notes that some captains would disappear at the last sight of the coast, grieving for their families and their homes, and emerge from their quarters after a few days in a 'serene' state. Others grew in stature once free of their land-based cares, of the debt, the indolence and obligations.

Conrad derives immense joy from the craft of the sea, its particular language, 'an instrument wrought into perfection by ages of experience'. He relishes dissecting the particular constraints and dangers of being on the water. Good seamanship is more than competence – it is life-saving and life-affirming, a moral stance. A decent seaman should never feel secure. The captain he trusted most was the one who appeared always poised to 'grapple with some impending calamity'. He questions the growing sport of yacht racing for its emphasis on speed; good sailing is precise, prompt and controlled. It is born of love, and 'love is the enemy of haste'.

A powerful yearning drives these recollections, begun a decade or so after he had come ashore for the last time. It is a yearning for the footloose days of port-hopping, for the long ocean passages, but also for every aspect that distinguishes maritime life from land life, that might

reveal the secret of its wonderful mystique. He speaks of the 'sacred fire' that burned in him for 'the exercise of my craft'. Ships were the temples of this cult. 'No seaman ever cherished a ship, even if she belonged to him, merely because of the profit she put in his pocket.' Sea-going vessels are animate and their construction the closest man comes to creating life with his hands. Sailing a ship is not like operating a machine. Setting the right combination of twenty or more sails, trimming them for the ship's foibles, for the way she plays every point of sail and sea state, 'takes the fullest share of your thought, of your skill, of your self-love.'

It is a measure of some ships' perfect blend of form and function that they look so depressing in port. One is 'a prisoner meditating upon freedom'; a group moored amidst the dismal residencies of London's East End looks like 'a flock of swans kept in the flooded backyard of grim tenement houses.' The proper place for the spirited vessels of the world is on the open sea. 'Ports are no good – ships rot, men go to the devil!'

Out on the ocean – over the guardrail, beyond the tangle of stays and sheets, behind the shifting planes of the sails – there is the sea itself. To the sailor it 'is not a navigable element, but an intimate companion' – but a heartless one: 'the most amazing wonder of the deep is its unfathomable cruelty'. Staring at the sea for so many years led Conrad to see it in cosmological terms. No man, he writes, 'ever saw the sea looking young as the earth looks young in spring . . . it is a gale of wind that makes the sea look old'. The wind in such moments is 'the voice of the world's soul'. But the water below is something altogether more haunting, more elemental, and he reaches far back to the first lines of the Biblical Creation to describe it: 'of hoary age, lustreless, dull, without gleams, as though it had been created before light itself.'

Conrad went to sea at a momentous time in maritime history. Until the nineteenth century, ship design had altered little for three or four hundred years. 'Race-built' hulls with a three-masted rig had been established as a perfect combination during the Tudor period, and while sails had been added on each mast, and sometimes extra masts too were

carried, the basic model proved supremely efficient both for fighting and for trade. These craft were the wind-powered engines of change, spreading Europeans and their avaricious ways around the globe. Following the Napoleonic wars, experiments began using steam power at sea. But it was decades before they attained supremacy. The shaking of the propeller proved damaging to wooden hulls; in the early days, so much coal was needed for long passages that there was often little space for cargo.

By the time the sixteen-year-old Conrad arrived in Marseilles in the 1870s, it was clear that the great age of sail was over, though engaged in a hearty swan song: some of the largest and fastest sailing vessels ever – the clippers – were being built. Conrad's first passage as an officer, in 1880, was on one – the *Loch Etive*, completed in Glasgow just three years earlier. Under her master, he learned the exhilaration of 'carrying on', keeping enough sail up in a rising wind to maintain speed but not so much as to 'carry away', to lose spars or masts. 'I have carried on myself upon the tall spars of that Clyde shipbuilder's masterpiece as I have never carried on in a ship before or since.'

Whenever he was able, Conrad chose sail: of the eighteen sea-going craft he served on only five had engines. He was a 'man of the masts and sail'. If his love of the sea was made manifest in ships, in the arcane skills of handling them, then it was in sailing ships. Their relationship to the elements of the sea was both more involved and more intimate than that of steam ships. If the masts were lost, there was always the option of setting a jury-rig and limping to port; a disabled steamer was truly disabled. Here he tells the story of his friend who drifted for three weeks when his ship lost her engines; in the end, he took to his berth and wept.

Conrad's final passage was on a clipper. But it was not quite the end of his maritime career. He remained as keen as ever to return to sea, and a few months later signed up as second mate on the *Adowa*, commissioned to transport settlers from France to Canada. But the charterers went bust and he never got further than Rouen. In *A Personal Record* (1912), he gives a sorry account of these his last ever days on board a ship, a

cold and wretched spell on the Seine looking out on ‘a wide stretch of paved quay brown with frozen mud’. The *Adowa* was the future – an iron steamer of 2,097 tons, built at Sunderland in 1882. But for Conrad, she was the end, where both he and the new technology diverged. In her chilly and static below-decks, he worked on his first book *Almayer’s Folly* (1895), taking the initial steps on his literary path for which he is now remembered.

Conrad’s years at sea also coincided with the most dangerous period for the merchant marine. Global trade was escalating and the rewards of providing hold-space pushed aside concerns for safety. In a single week in 1880, *The Times* reported 186 wrecks worldwide. In British ships that year, twelve hundred seamen died – a far higher proportion on sailing ships than on steamers.

For Conrad the sailor, such perils were a reminder of the heartless nature of the sea; for Conrad the writer, they were raw material. *Lord Jim* draws on the real-life case of the *Jeddah*, severely damaged in a storm in 1880, the 1,000-odd pilgrims abandoned by its officers. The figure of the guilt-torn ship’s master was the model for Jim himself, a victim of ‘those events of the sea that show in the light of day the inner worth of a man.’

The Mirror of the Sea is one of the few sources for Conrad’s own sea years. He kept a rather brief journal only for his journey up the Congo. One or two letters survive; there are glimpses of him in the accounts of others. What emerges is a colourful and enigmatic figure. In Marseilles, at the beginning, he styled himself Konrad de Korzeniowski – the adopted ‘*de*’ helping to add a little aristocracy to his unusual origins. He was known on his first ship as ‘the Count’; ashore, a monocle and clipped goatee beard added more dash to his image. Years later when John Galsworthy met him for the first time as an officer on the *Torrens*, he recalled a ‘strong, foreign accent’ and that he seemed ‘strange on an English ship’.

Ships’ companies at the time tended to divide along national lines. English, Scottish, American, Norwegian contingents stuck to their

ethnic groups – but there were rarely Poles. The young Conrad was always an outsider, adrift in a world where everything was flux. As a parentless child from the forested regions of Eastern Europe, he found the sea doubly alien. All mariners know intuitively that they have trusted themselves not just to the largest part of the earth's surface, but its most hostile. For Conrad, the sea echoed his own isolation and he was further isolated by temperament, by his own contemplative, truth-seeking nature. Reflection and sea-going have rarely gone together. Sailors are pragmatic, their only concession to metaphysics a tendency to superstition.

One of the curious aspects of maritime literature is that, given both the intensity of being at sea and the numbers of people involved, there isn't more of it. Plenty of accounts of sinkings and strandings, of sea battles and explorations – but to write of the sea itself, of what it reveals of the nature of the world and our place in it, to describe its shifting shapes and the effect it has on the spirit, to deconstruct the frailty and complexity of the devices we have developed to cross it, that is rare. For almost two millennia, between the amphibious Ancient Greeks and Hermann Melville, few who bore witness to the sea for any time sought to define it. Even now, the shelves of works purely about the sea are thin. That is what makes *The Mirror of the Sea* so valuable.

A love of adventure first drew Conrad to the water, a love of the nautical way of life sustained him on it, and a love of language drove him to write about it. The words 'love and passion' occur in these pages too often to be ignored. They help create the sense of an elegy – both for his own youth and for sail, the vanishing world of topmasts and halyards and sheets, blocks and clews and canvas. Ford Madox Ford noticed the effect on Conrad of the name *Tremolino* – the 60-ton felucca in which for eight months his bold and youthful soul was at its most fulfilled, secreting guns in cargoes of oranges for Spanish rebels. She was the 'most beloved' of all his ships, and saw the most compelling of all his adventures. 'When he mentioned her,' recalled Ford, 'his face lit up. Nay, it lit up before he mentioned her, the smile coming, before the

name, to his lips.’

Few others writers have ever been as familiar as Conrad was with the spirit of the sea. What he felt for it was ‘something too great for words’. Like his mountain-top mystic trying to evoke the face of God, all his efforts, all his carefully-crafted language were not quite enough. To write of the sea directly, to encompass it in prose, is impossible. The mystique of sailing, the role of all its paraphernalia, the wild sea-tossed lives of mariners can all be spun into narrative, or here recalled as fact – but not the element that produced them. Unlike landscape the sea has no past, no topography. Man’s presence on it leaves no mark; it is never still. Look out on it, try and define it and like Conrad here, you will reveal only your own innermost concerns. You can no more describe the surface of the sea than you can the surface of a mirror.

Philip Marsden
Ardevora, 2013

*... for this miracle or this wonder
troubleth me right gretly*

BOETHIUS