JOSEPH CONRAD

Joseph Conrad, an extraordinary and significant Polish British literary figure of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, lived the last decades of his life in Bishopsbourne, a village about six miles south of Canterbury in the Elham valley. Born in 1857 in Berdychiv, Ukraine, to Polish parents of noble birth who protested Russian rule of their homeland, Conrad had a disrupted childhood as his family was persecuted by the Russian authroities. Whilst this meant that he lost the opportunity of regular education, his father, Apollo, taught him at home and shared a love of literature with his son. Unfortunately, at the age of 11, Conrad lost his parents to Tuberculosis and the orphan was sent to live with an uncle in Kracow, where he was schooled. The young Conrad was bright but lacked enthusiasm for study and began to dream of a career at sea, having been inspired by an account of the search for Franklin’s ships lost in the endeavour to discover the north-west passage. Despite his apparent lack of enthusiasm, Conrad retained a love of Polish Romantic literature and acquired French and the classical languages whilst in Kracow, and this enable him to engage with both his first career at sea and then his second as a writer.

At the age of 16, Conrad’s uncle arranged for him to join a French shipping company in Marseilles, and he spent 4 years sailing on French ships, before his service was ended by a withdrawal of his papers by the Russian consul. This led to a failed suicide attempt, after which, in 1878, Conrad moved to England and joined the British mercantile marine. For the next 15 years he served in every rank, with one voyage as Master in 1889, when he took the sailing vessel Otago from Sydney to the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean. It was the seagoing experience of sailing around the world that gave Conrad the knowledge of men and places that were later to form the heart of his stories. Conrad visited Poland on leave and took an appointment in the Belgian Congo in 1890 before returning to sea.

Conrad came ashore in 1894 due to persistent ill-health and a desire to write and published his first novel, ‘Almayer’s Folly’ in the following year. Set in Borneo, he used his sailing experiences to reflect on colonialism, a theme that was to continue through further novels such as ‘Heart of Darkness’ (1899) and ‘An Outpost of Progress’ (1897`). Conrad married an English woman, Jessie in 1896, and they lived in the Kent countryside with their 3 children. Although a popular novelist and eventually recognised by the critics, Conrad did not enjoy financial success, although he was awarded an annual government grant of £100 in 1910, which helped until his death at the age of 66 in August 1824. Conrad died in his house (Oswalds) in Bishopsbourne and was buried in Canterbury Cemetery.

Conrad’s legacy lies in his storytelling and his capture of the human interest in what was, during his time, regarded as exotic and ordinary. Major feature films such as ‘Lord Jim’(1965), ‘Apocalypse Now’ (1979) and ‘An Outcast of the Islands’ (1952) provide testimony for the enduring humanity of his work.