

# Conrad as I Knew Him

Reviewed by Charles R. Walker

**JOSEPH CONRAD: A PERSONAL REMEMBRANCE.** By Ford Madox Ford (Ford Madox Hueffer) Boston: Little, Brown & Co. \$2.50.

**H**ERE is not only the best book on Joseph Conrad, but the only book as far as I am aware that penetrates and then records the actual chemistry — with formula and all — in the spiritual manufacture of novels.

It is written like a Conrad-Hueffer novel, an affair of "impressions," of successive enlargements upon the character of Conrad, his face, his income, and his use of English, as those and all other facts about him moved into the writer's vision. "... here, to the measure of the ability vouchsafed, you have a projection of Joseph Conrad as, little by little, he revealed himself to a human being during many years of close intimacy. It is so that, by degrees, Lord Jim appeared to Marlowe, or that every human soul by degrees appears to every other human soul." From the moment when the first letter from Conrad was read by Hueffer in a room at the Pent farm, with a wild robin hopping across the floor between waiting cats, on through their years of collaboration in France, in England, in Belgium, on through that romantic episode when Hueffer accompanied Conrad to Poland as his second in a duel (in Poland, seconds fight as well as firsts) till he read of his death in the black headlines of a newspaper in a small English railway station, the man Conrad unfolds and gleams in Hueffer's pages like Lord Jim, or Nostromo, or any of the other living characters of Conrad's books. And the enterprise, at times quite desperate, at times glorious, of a Pole writing novels in English is like Lord Jim's great passion of self-justification, or the profound romance of the San Tomé mine.

A young man who is sitting beside me as I write has just made a paraphrase for me of the "official biography" of a literary man. The young man is a poet with a wholesome distaste for the memoirs of poets. "'The next ten years,'" he parodies, "'the poet spent in Italy, where his style absorbed into its being the pageantry and color of feudalism.' They don't tell you who sent him his checks!" cries the young man.

Quite right. And that is one thing Hueffer does. He tells who sent Conrad his checks — or who didn't. How Conrad with a Sixteenth Century love for gold-lined adventures was forever planning — before he left the sea — a voyage or a deal or the purchase of a mine that would make his everlasting fortune. And later

how he persuaded his English grocer to extend him three months' credit! How his loans tortured his conscience and deranged his writing. Now no official biography does more than adumbrate such finance unless the poet starve *à la mode* in a garret.

Hueffer tells the things that really modify, torture, enhance an artist in the obscure miracle of his growth. He gives the grueling process of composing with all its details. Take Conrad and Hueffer on "Romance," for example, with their gamut of elations and despondencies — the long nights of talk at the Pent farm — the final shaping of the thing, *five years later*, in a noisome boarding house in Belgium. And Conrad's theory of his art, meditated upon during some watch at sea, talked out with Hueffer in England, wrought out with pain in the always difficult English tongue.

From sicklied memories of literary biography I recall in pain discussions of style, plot, philosophy, early influences, *ad dormiendum*. Yet when Hueffer tells allied details of Conrad, one follows as into the interior heart of a favorite character. The pages are copied on paper from a vivid memory, and like the rest of the *novel*, put down impressionistically, with surprise, acceleration, and climax.

We agreed that the general effect of a novel must be the general effect that life makes on mankind. A novel must therefore not be a narration, a report. Life does not say to you: In 1914 my next-door neighbor, Mr. Slack, erected a greenhouse and painted it with Cox's green aluminum paint. . . . If you think about the matter you will remember, in various unordered pictures, how one day Mr. Slack appeared in his garden and contemplated the wall of his house. You will remember Mr. Slack — then much thinner because it was before he found out where to buy that cheap Burgundy. . . . Mr. Slack again came into his garden, this time with a pale, weaselly-faced fellow, who touched his cap from time to time. Some days after, coming back from business, you will have observed against Mr. Slack's wall. . . . At this point you will remember that you were then the manager of the fresh-fish branch of Messrs. Catlin and Clovis in Fenchurch Street. . . . What a change since then! Millicent had not yet put her hair up. . . .

**T**HIS shows the Conrad-Hueffer method of treating an event or a character as either impinged bit by bit, angle by angle, upon another human mind — impressionism or, in other words, dramatic exposition applied to language, cadence, style, and philosophy.

After reading Hueffer, you re-read

Conrad's novels with something of the excitement of their creator and with some inkling of his pains. The book has avoided all analysis of the individual novels; it has recorded a literary passion, an ordered curiosity, the profoundest aims, uttered and unuttered, of a literary artist. Take this book and the "Personal Record" and you have nearly the whole of Conrad so far as the spirit of an artist can be put into words. Like a steel blade carving away the sentimental æsthetic of the literary lionizer comes Hueffer's remark that in all the world the two things Conrad hated most were the *sea* and *writing*!

**H**UEFFER does not supplement what he learned through these scattered collaborations, those meetings in Belgium, that winter in London society, those early-in-the-morning conversations on Hueffer's English farm, with research into the Polish archives or any others. Nor does he even read Conrad letters or look up dates, as a biographer should. But the book isn't that; it's a novel — "a personal remembrance," the title-page says. The revelation of Conrad is gradual and spotty, as is the revelation, by chance and mischance, of any human soul to another. But it is lit by an intense common passion, a practical and instinctive first knowledge of the thing of most importance in the reserved hearts of both.

Some persons on reading "Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance" will discover a patronizing spirit in it and protest that it was written by a little man to suck away the glory of a great one. The answer to that is Stephen Crane's remark, when someone told him that Hueffer was patronizing *him*. Crane replied that Hueffer patronized Conrad and Mr. Henry James and everyone else; he would one day patronize God, but God would get used to it, for Hueffer was all right.

In some ways this book must remain unique, for it is unlikely that many writers of first rank will collect collaborators of first rank, also. I certainly would not suggest that memoir writers from now on turn to writing their heroes up in the manner of novels in the closely imitated style of their subjects. That would be most horrible — because most unnatural. Each biographer must pick his medium to get over his man, but in the emphasis and omissions of Hueffer's book, there is suggestion, vision, and sheer wisdom enough to pass around to every literary biographer. The Conrad lover must put the book on the shelf next the last volume of Conrad.