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**Allan H. Simmons, ed., *Joseph Conrad in Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University**

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**J**OSEPH CONRAD *in Context* consists of thirty-two relatively short essays (most are seven or eight pages long) that are arranged in three sections: “Life and Works,” “Critical Fortunes,” and “Critical and Cultural Context.” The volume also includes a preface by the editor, a useful chronology, suggestions for further reading, and a substantial index.

By the first sentence of the preface the singular “context” of the title has become a plural: the volume “locates Conrad within the contexts that contribute to a better understanding of his life, work and growing reputation” (xv). Most but not all of the essays in the first and third sections have to do with what we can term “genetic contexts,” that is, their investigations are primarily concerned to throw light on that which may help us to understand how, and why, Conrad wrote what he did write. These essays also arguably present the reader with information that can and perhaps should be borne in mind when reading and interpreting Conrad’s fictions. But the essays in the second section, and a number in the other two sections, focus on a different sort of context: those in which, and in response to which, Conrad’s fictions have been published, read, and interpreted.

“Context” is a term and a concept that has enjoyed mixed fortunes in literary studies since the time of the Russian formalists. One of their number, Boris Eikhenbaum, in his essay “The Theory of the ‘Formal Method’” (1926) famously cast scorn on those literary historians who, acting like policemen on the scene of a crime, arrested everyone in sight on the off-chance that they might have had something to do with it. The Anglo-American New Critics

not only ruled out the application of biographical and historical evidence to literary interpretation, but also extended this prohibition both to authors' intentions and to individual readers' responses to literary texts.

Critical fashion has swung far away from such a stern insistence that the study and reading of literature should involve a concern with literary works – the words on the page – and nothing more. But as “the historical moment” has succeeded “the linguistic moment” in critical fashion, some traces of the formalists' warnings need to be retained. For the study of “contexts” to be of value to the literary scholar (or Common Reader), it needs to be demonstrated that the context in question is in some way or another relevant to the text in question. By “relevant,” I mean that it must be possible to show either that the text is as it is to some degree because of the context in question, or that a knowledge of this context can help the reader to gain more from his or her reading of the text. Authors may belong to certain contexts that hardly affect their writing. One may write of a desert while lying by the sea (although there are always Freudians on hand to respond that it is because one is lying by the sea that one writes of deserts). Additionally, of course, those with a legitimate interest in, say, Conrad the man, may find other contextual information valuable even if it throws no new light on the works or their reception.

Critical issues such as these apart, it may be worth airing an additional potential objection to a volume such as this before looking at the essays in it. “Why,” a hypothetical reader might ask, “should I read eight pages on “Religion” by John Lester, eight pages on “Disease and medicine” by Martin Bock, and eight pages on “Popular Culture” by Stephen Donovan, when I have on my shelf full-length books written by these same authors on these same topics and their relevance to Joseph Conrad?”

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My overwhelming sense when I finished reading *Joseph Conrad in Context* was that the contributions to this volume *do* justify that opening sentence in the preface, and do contribute to a better understanding of Conrad's life, work, and reputation. This is partly because the contributors are possessed of a critical sophistication that allows them to recognize the limits of contextual explanations. In the opening essay entitled simply "Life," J. H. Stape concludes a deftly executed summary of Conrad's biography with the admission that "The gap yawns wide between the inner and outer man, for Conrad was particularly adept at adopting the carapace that late-Victorian and Edwardian protocols and his gentry background urged on him," and he adds that the author's life-story "is sometimes more truly grasped in the sideways glance or in the fissures of a larger, seemingly coherent picture" (9). In spite of such a significant concession, even those of us with thick biographies of Conrad on our shelves will find something of value in Stape's eight pages on the life. One reason for this is that the greater the distance, the easier it is to detect significant patterns. In eight pages one is unlikely to lose the wood for the trees, and many of the essays in this volume do focus the reader's attention on to significant or dominant patterns that can easily be obscured in longer studies. Another reason is that the volume is able to include the results of the most recent research. Thus Stape, for example, is able to correct 'all biographical accounts' (9, n. 3) that describe Jessie George as a typist, pointing out that she worked for a typewriter manufacturing company.

Stape's concession finds an echo in David Miller's essay on "Biography and memoirs." While admitting the great achievement of Conrad's various biographers and editors, Miller notes somewhat wistfully that "it is hard not to think that Conrad biography remains what it has always been: a self-limiting genre, constrained by the opaque nature of its subject who can, as [Owen] Knowles states, 'disappear from view for long periods'" (46). Miller is however good on the memoirs written by Jessie, Borys and John Conrad, although

his description of the book by Borys as “lacklustre, self-serving and wilfully elusive” (43) is a little harsh.

A review of a book containing thirty-two short essays must needs be selective. I must report that I found the essays on “Disease and medicine” by Martin Bock and on “Publishing” by Aaron Zacks to be especially good examples of the benefits that brevity can have with regard to the revealing of pattern. Bock’s opening sentence in particular struck me very forcibly: “Disease and doctors were Conrad’s lifelong companions” (124). There is a sense in which this tells the established scholar of Conrad and his works nothing new, but there is also a sense in which it does. Being forced to think about this statement as it applies to the whole of Conrad’s life, rather than just to, say, his time in Africa or his nightmare stay in Montpellier, is instructive. Bock also makes a fascinating comment about that novel of Conrad’s that was the longest in the writing. “Advances in parasitology and tropical medicine are registered in the composition history of *The Rescue*, begun in 1896 but only completed in 1919: the early chapters reveal little interest in insect life, but after the medical discovery that the *Anopheles* mosquito is the vector for malaria, and the tsetse fly the vector for sleeping sickness / Gambia fever, it is significant that the novel’s characters, in later chapters, are plagued by clouds of insects and tropical fever” (126).

There are other challenging generalizations in this book. “Conrad’s whole life was shaped by and responsive to nationalism and Empire” (187), a statement that opens Allan Simmons’s useful essay on “Nationalism and Empire.” And from the same author’s essay on “Politics”: “Conrad’s was a politicized life from its outset” (195).

Aaron Zack’s essay on “Publishing” provides very useful information with regard to the intersection of Conrad’s literary career and the changes in the magazine and book-publishing businesses. Zack points out that the publisher of Conrad’s first novel, T. Fisher Unwin, was one of the “new generation of publishers” who “recognized the economic

advantage in bypassing the intermediary libraries and appealing directly to the reader with new, affordable literature” (213). Zack also has much of interest to say about Conrad and magazine publication, noting the ideological-political associations of some of the periodicals in which he published, as well as the way in which “In addition to the steady income, Blackwood’s patronage provided Conrad with liberties of style and timetable that other publishers most likely would not have granted” (215). Zack’s essay is usefully complemented by Stephen Donovan’s essay “Popular Culture,” which adds more on the growth of the periodical press during the time of Conrad’s career, and by Linda Dryden’s on “Reading,” which gives a third perspective on Conrad’s choice of periodicals.

Zack’s essay also dovetails nicely with the essay on “Chronology of composition and publication” by Katherine Isobel Baxter. While Zack focuses more on T. Fisher Unwin’s location in the politics and economics of the publishing industry, Baxter throws light on the sort of books that Unwin was publishing. She notes that in 1894, when Conrad submitted the manuscript of *Almayer’s Folly*, “Unwin’s titles were decidedly global in their subject matter,” and that “Unwin’s list did not shy away from books showing the shabbier side of colonialism, particularly in the East” (11). Baxter points out that “Escaping from one writing project to another became a familiar pattern in Conrad’s writing career and is one reason why, despite an output that averaged almost one volume a year, he constantly felt that he was working slowly” (12).

Laurence Davies’s essay on the “*Fin de siècle*” is also packed with insights and useful information. While the volume has no separate essay on sexuality or gender (more could have been written for example, about the suffrage movement in a volume such as this), Davies’s essay contains much of interest on the different “narratives of degeneration” of the time. Davies quotes Bernard Shaw’s remark about “manly women and womanly men,” categories that can be found well-spread throughout Conrad’s fiction. He is also shrewd in his

comments on *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* noting that while the text itself treats pity with scorn, "in the 'Preface' that accompanied the final instalment, Conrad diverged from [W. E.] Henley's line, distinguishing between sentimental pity and the pity owed to justice and compassion" (150).

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What of the essays in the middle section, those that have to do with Conrad's critical fortunes? There are four essays on "Critical responses" that divide the cake up into 4 chronological slices, written by Allan H. Simmons, Owen Knowles, Richard Niland, and A. M. Pursell. These do an excellent job in showing the rise and fall both of critical fashions and also of the critical fortunes of Conrad's fiction. I enjoyed Allan Simmons's report that, following on from the responses of early critics who repeatedly found Conrad "a 'difficult' author, one who eschews the conventions of plot construction, chronology and narration" (63), by 1920, perversely, "reviewers now also criticized Conrad's novels for brevity and being straightforward" (64).

Owen Knowles stresses, rightly, the importance of F. R. Leavis's qualified and quirky praise of Conrad in restoring Conrad's critical fortunes from the 1940s onwards. Following Leavis, though, the inclusion of an important essay on *Nostramo* in the second volume of Arnold Kettle's *An Introduction to the English Novel* (1953) also played a very significant role in cementing Conrad's critical reputation. Kettle's book was very widely prescribed as a set text for several decades, and his praise of Conrad from a Marxist perspective neatly complemented Leavis's very different sort of approval. I am pretty sure that the very first critical account of a Conrad text that I read as a student was Kettle's essay on *Nostramo*.

In the same middle section of the book, Richard J. Hand's "Dramatic and other adaptations" surveys Conrad's own dramatizations and the adaptations of his works into plays, TV versions and films done by others. There is an additional chapter to be written at some point on the intertextual afterlife of Conrad's works and characters; Hands touches tantalisingly on some aspects of this, but there is more to be written. There is I feel a book to be authored on Mr Kurtz's life after *Heart of Darkness*: it would make an interesting (if doubtless perpetually unfinished) biography.

Finally in this section, Mario Curreli has an engaging essay on translations of Conrad, which includes some interesting material on the concealed censorship to which Conrad's works were subject during the process of translation. (In Russia, not surprisingly, the censorship was more likely to involve not deletions from a text but omissions from the canon.)

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This is a very strong collection, and it includes no weak essays. It contains many other excellent pieces, including ones on Conrad's language (Mary Morzinski on his Polish and Véronique Pauly on his French), and, by Allan Simmons, Addison Bross, and J. H. Stape, on the different geographical parts of the globe that Conrad travelled to and that exerted an influence on him and his work. Richard Niland has useful pieces on "The First World War" and "Intellectual Movements," as well as covering critical responses for the period 1950 to 1975. Robert Hampson has a particularly rich essay on "Literary Movements," in which although he notes Conrad's comment that he was "not a coterie writer," he draws many useful connections between Conrad and other writers, both those mediated through texts and those made by personal contacts.

Michael Levenson's essay on "Modernism" also provides much illumination on Conrad's relation to that literary movement or movements to which retrospectively we give the name of modernism. Levenson's argument that for Conrad the most conspicuous legacy of this emerging modernism was "something broader than school or doctrine: it was the ideal of craft, a sense of the artistic vocation as self-generating and self-legitimated, as an independently justified human practice" (180) throws an importantly different light on what Conrad's description of himself as "modern" implied.

Robert Foulke's chastely entitled essay "Sea" includes telling comments on the importance of a knowledge of issues of seamanship to a full understanding of many of Conrad's fictions, as well as some chilling statistics about deaths and sinkings. In 1873 alone, for example, twenty-three coal-laden ships sailing from British ports were lost as a result of spontaneous combustion. The following year the figure was fifty.

M. S. Newton's essay on "Anarchism" provides a useful summary of the movement as it developed in Conrad's time and as it was dealt with in Conrad's work. Newton admits that "Why Conrad turned to the subject of Anarchism in the period 1906-07 remains unclear" (122). Here, like others, Newton honestly admits the limits of what a "context" can tell us about an author or his or her work. But Conrad's comment in a letter to Cunninghame Graham (7 October, 1907) that "By Jove! If I had the necessary talent I would like to go for the true anarchist – which is the millionaire. Then you would see the venom flow. But it's too big a job" (CL3 491) is worth including in this discussion. Conrad saw artistic and symbolic possibilities in the idea of anarchism that went beyond its significance as a political movement.

This then is a book that should be on your shelf and in your library. Even if you have read the extended studies I mentioned earlier on religion, popular culture, and medicine you may still find that the short essays on these topics by the same authors have the virtue on

focussing your attention on to issues and patterns that you may have missed in the longer accounts. In like manner, even if you have read all nine volumes of the *Collected Letters* you may still find some thought-provoking remarks in Gene M. Moore's essay on "Letters" (his list of comments from the letters containing the word "hate" makes amusing reading).

As soon as *Joseph Conrad in Context* comes out in paperback, this book should be on reading lists for students. They will learn much from it, and may well be encouraged to read fuller accounts of the topics it covers.

If, as I firmly believe and ardently hope, there is a special place in heaven for editors, then with this volume Allan H. Simmons has earned himself one of the comfy chairs there.