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Joseph Conrad and Popular Culture (review)

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Stephen Donovan. *Joseph Conrad and Popular Culture*.

Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005. 236 pp., with illustrations, notes and index. ISBN 1-4039-0810-9

The introduction to *Joseph Conrad and Popular Culture* begins with Conrad's claim in 1897 that he was not a popular author and probably never would be. Given his apparent disdain for the popularity achieved by Robert Louis Stevenson, and in the light of his aversion to Rider Haggard's popular romances, for example, it could be assumed that Conrad never courted popularity. A close reading of his letters, of course, reveals that to reach such a conclusion would be to underestimate greatly Conrad's desire for popular recognition: he may have disliked Haggard's style and agenda, but his comments on Stevenson barely disguise the fact that he regarded the Scotsman's popular reputation with not a little envy. In fact, by 1901 he was openly exhorting James Brand Pinker to use the growing influence of advertising to promote his own work, and, by way of persuasion, confessing his own vulnerability to its power, exclaiming: "Why! even I myself feel the spell of such emphasis" (CL 2: 319). Stephen Donovan is acutely alert to the nuances of Conrad's attitude towards popularity, and in this volume he sets out not to contradict Conrad's statement of 1897, but to unravel the intricate relationship between this elusive author and the popular culture of his time.

Donovan's project to position Conrad in relation to popular culture involves going beyond listing and commenting on the instances of references in Conrad's works. His aim is more wide-reaching in scope: to demonstrate how the popular culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had a direct influence on Conrad's artistic imagination, and how he developed his own methods in response to the demands of the popular marketplace. He charts how the practices and products of the popular contributed to Conrad's vision at key moments in his texts, and how seemingly inconsequential details were in fact deeply rooted in Conrad's contemporary world and in his cultural experiences. This is a valuable undertaking that makes a significant contribution to our knowledge about Conrad and his times. In outlining the impact of such popular events as moving picture shows, waxwork exhibits, popular ballads, music hall entertainment, tourism, advertising, popular pastimes, and magazines, Donovan shows that attention to the culture behind the popular references in the novels and stories can illuminate Conrad's method—his desire, as famously stated in the

preface to the *Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* to "make you see." Recognition of how popular cultural practices are embedded in his narratives can add new meaning to a character's thoughts and actions. For example, in discussing Winnie Verloc's "visual thought processes" Donovan has introduced the popular contingencies upon which Winnie's thoughts and actions are predicated, thus revealing her as truly a woman of her time, her place, and her culture, and by association, revealing Conrad to be keenly culturally aware (34).

Such examples illustrate how *Joseph Conrad and Popular Culture* extends the existing information about the minutiae of Conrad's life, establishing a complex interplay between the author's actual experience of the popular and how it becomes inscribed in the narratives. Chapter 1 meticulously charts Conrad's journeys about England and Europe with an engaging cultural commentary on the visual highlights of these travels in terms of advertising hoardings, visual displays like the cinema and magic lantern entertainments, photography, and modern city lighting. Not only does this convey a palpable sense of Conrad's own reactions on seeing these spectacles, but it also recuperates for the reader a sense of what it would have been like to live and experience the Edwardian age. Subsequent references to these visual stimuli in Conrad's writing impress upon the reader the impact of visual technology upon the cultural climate of early twentieth-century Britain, but also their impact on narrative form and content. Filling such gaps in the popular cultural dimension of Conrad biography reminds us that since Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* (1958) it has long been the project of cultural studies to reexamine the contribution and value of the popular to our wider cultural lives. This project reminds us too that to record the ephemera of the everyday is a valuable undertaking in itself as an act of recuperating the past.

In chapter 2 Donovan deals with tourism as popular culture, and the accounts of Conrad's "holidays" reveal the depth of his knowledge about popular cultural pastimes in the early twentieth century. Again, his description of the seaside activities of the time brings to life a distant moment in our history when many of the popular practices and activities of the present day were being established. Donovan's acuity is ably demonstrated when he discusses Max Beerbohm's satiric cartoon of Conrad, "Somewhere in the Pacific," remarking that "'Conrad on the Beach' would have been even better since the joke draws its force in part from the irreconcilability of Conrad and the seaside" (63). The account of events that the Conrads would have witnessed or heard about during their stay on Capri is rich in local detail and color, and

Donovan argues convincingly for the influence of these occurrences on Conrad's later writing. Ultimately this assessment of Edwardian tourism locates it firmly within the practices of modernism, and Conrad is positioned as a sometimes ironic and sometimes astute but reluctant commentator on this manifestation of a rapidly expanding world. Some of these events may be familiar to those with an intimate of Conrad biography, but what Donovan adds to previous knowledge is a sense of the cultural atmosphere in which these events occurred: we catch fleeting moments in the writer's life, but moments that are suffused with cultural resonances that find their way into his narratives.

When it comes to the motorcar Donovan notes with wry humor Conrad's fondness for speeding, while at the same time deftly outlining the cultural impact of this new mode of transport on the countryside and the various responses to its advent. The chapter closes with a careful analysis of Conrad's use of "pedestrianism" in *Chance*, a novel, Donovan suggests, that Conrad came to regard as a "comparison of life on shore with life at sea, the latter representing a space of moral and emotional integrity capable of overcoming the deceit and self-interest generated on land" (96–7). This discussion is notable as an example of how popular culture, in this case walking, is integral to Conrad's artistic and narrative purpose. Donovan explores how Conrad uses the act of walking and the spatial encounters of his perambulating characters to inscribe their relationships. This is, once more, an example of how attention to the seemingly innocuous or peripheral elements of narrative can unveil important clues as to meaning, so that the very act of walking becomes a cipher through which human relationships are negotiated, tested, and established.

In the next chapter, devoted to advertising, Donovan avers that "Conrad's own experience of London was profoundly shaped by advertising" (113). He sees advertising operating in literary texts at multiple levels: as material artifacts; as a "discourse regulating the innermost desires of individuals"; or as a "semiotic system expressive of the new global economy" (116). Charting the rise of advertising in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Donovan reveals how the advertising practices of his time at once repelled and engrossed Conrad. So, for example, scandals in the South American meat manufacturing industries find expression in "An Anarchist," and the sharp practices of real life ad-men create the tragedy of "The Partner." While noting the narrative use of contemporary advertising in the stories, Donovan comments dryly that "it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that neither 'An Anarchist' nor 'The Partner' would ever have seen the light of day

without the twenty pages of advertisements—for soaps, hair restorers, underwear, coffee, tobacco, baking powder, cocoas, whiskies, disinfectants, toothpastes and fountain pens—that bracketed the literary contents of *Harper's*" (152). Building on Susan Jones's excellent work in this field, Donovan thus maps the mutually reliant relationship between the popular, in terms of the advertising that accompanied such work, and the artistic content of the work itself. This kind of contextualizing of the serializations of Conrad's work, and by extension that of other writers, affords us a gratifying glimpse of the early experience of reading these works in their original format.

The final chapter considers serial magazine fiction "as a freely accessible repository of popular fantasies upon which Conrad drew for the plots and narratives of his own writing" (165). Through an account of Conrad's relationship with popular magazines and his publishing history therein, Donovan makes a firm case for his argument that despite his apparent disdain for magazine fiction, he, in fact, "internalized the arts of the magazine writer, and, in the process, learned how to write his own style of popular (in varying degrees) magazine fiction" (175). Comments such as this reveal why this chapter is important in its revision of Conrad's relationship to popular serialization and his conception of his own place in contemporary fiction. Mustering an impressive roll call of commentators on magazine publication, Donovan problematizes earlier assumptions and presents us with a much more nuanced interpretation of Conrad's response to the prospect of serialization than has hitherto been available. Delineating the matrix of gender, class, social expectation and convention, cultural signifiers, and such recurrent yearly festivities as Christmas, Donovan demonstrates how popular culture is inscribed in the subject matter of his stories, but also how Conrad increasingly recognizes the need to respond to rapidly changing cultural conditions. Pitching stories to particular magazines with clearly defined audiences, Conrad was, he argues, not compromising his art, but developing those familiar traces of literary modernism that set him apart from earlier writers, and, it must be said, many of his contemporaries.

The volume closes with a challenge: rather than adding yet another unnecessary tome to the mountain of critical material already available on Conrad, this book opens up the possibility for further critical inquiry. It does so by contributing to the growing number of critiques of the place of literature within cultural history. Donovan's contribution to this fascinating area is to chart the intersections between Conrad's works and a variety of popular cultural practices: visual entertainment,

tourism, advertising, and magazine fiction. Within the potential field of popular culture such a list is far from exhaustive and Donovan's exhortation for others to take up the challenge and build upon what he has done is to be welcomed. One can only hope that any future attempt to position Conrad within the context of popular culture will be executed with similar erudition and the seemingly effortless authority as Donovan displays in this very welcome addition to Conrad studies.

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