A Captivating Portrait of a Believable and Fascinating Person

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of society (the artists and intellectuals) go from a partisan enthusiasm in the
nineteenth century to a view of empire in the twentieth century as an inglorious
enterprise, deforming both ruler and ruled. This reading of the novel as a study
of the "self-destructive dynamics of the imperialist venture" thus prepares the
way for the view of empire found in later writers, such as Forster, Orwell, Joyce
Cary, and Evelyn Waugh.

Conrad's view of imperialism is not completely favorable to the colonized,
however. While Nostromo may be a brilliant critique of capitalism in its picture
of a Latin American colonial enterprise, it also suggests that the colonized people
are incapable of self-rule.

McClure presents a well-reasoned thesis which shows his subjects as men of
their time whose works continue to deserve fresh critical attention. Moreover,
his approach and readable prose, largely free of critical jargon, encourages even
the general reader to experience once again the writers under discussion.

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4. A CAPTIVATING PORTRAIT OF A BELIEVABLE AND FASCINATING PERSON


Roger Tennant's biography of Joseph Conrad should be distinguished from other
biographies of this great English writer. First, Tennant considers Conrad's life
in a way different from the usual one. Whereas Frederick R. Karl sees his sub-
ject's life in three divisions, Pole, sailor, and writer, Tennant discerns three
stages in his life: Conrad's youth in Poland and his adventurous life as a seaman,
his time of poverty and struggle in England while writing his major works, and his
last years which included his triumphal visit to the United States and his decline
in creative power. Both arrangements of Conrad's life seem valid, but Tennant's
may be more useful. Second, the great difference between the two biographies—and
between Tennant's and all other lives of Conrad—is that Tennant does not attempt
to produce a major work containing both biography and criticism of his subject's
works; instead, he emphasizes biography but necessarily includes the works as part
of Conrad's life and uses them for quotations and support to illustrate his
explanations and conclusions about them.

In his forward, Tennant informs his readers that, having played as a child in
Hobart just across the river from the place where the hulk of Conrad's Otago "lay
dissolving in the mud," he later visited most of the places Conrad had visited. In
the 1950s, he read Lord Jim and then produced some Conradian works. He lived so
long with this author that, as he states, "I like to think that I know just what
he would do, or say, as he jerked his shoulders and threw away his newly lighted
cigarette, in any imaginable situation." And this is exactly what he has suc-
cceeded in doing in his biography of Conrad, and he has done it well. He achieves
fully what he attempted to do: not to offer any new facts about Conrad but to
present "a psychologically credible portrait of the man I regard as the greatest
writer in the English language." Although he makes a large claim, Tennant has,
almost perfectly, produced an unusually readable and exact record of Conrad's life which includes his works (unlike Karl, he writes extremely well), written for readers who delight in learning about a great writer without the problems of a scholar and who love to read excellent writing by a man who lovingly reminisces his way through Conrad's life and achievements.

Tennant's achievement is a boon for general readers who are not interested in the critical details, but occasionally he may disturb some readers by doing—unusually well—what is usually considered dangerous, that is, to deduce the "real" life of a writer largely from his works alone. Most of his quotations are from Conrad's works. T. S. Eliot, among many others, points out this problem: in The Three Voices of Poetry, he notes that attempts at tracing a poem back to its psychological sources distract us from the poem by directing attention "on to something else which, in the form in which it can be apprehended by the critic and his readers, has no relation to the poem and throws no light on it." Tennant, however, is not writing as a critic; therefore one should not object when he, only occasionally, may go a bit far with this practice: it is, after all, a part of his stated purpose in composing his biography. He reminds one of Jane Austen who, we recall, in speaking of her characters with her family while she wrote her novels, informed them of many incidents which do not appear in the completed works. With Miss Austen, this total knowledge of her characters is usually considered a virtue. Paul Valéry maintains, however, in a somewhat different context, that poetry cannot be continuous with the personality of the author: in order for it to be perfect, it is and must be impersonal. "Perfection eliminates the person of the author," he declares, and even more strongly, he adds that "I don't see what something that keeps reminding me of the man behind it has to do with art." But all such objections aside, Tennant has created a living and lifelike portrait of Joseph Conrad which seems to be accurate.

Tennant relates how Conrad used as sources for his stories, however slightly, actual people whom he had known of or had known. Thus Augustine Podmore Williams, first officer of the steamship Jeddah, left his ship when it seemed certain of sinking. Williams became Conrad's "soul" in the person of Lord Jim. Conrad changed many of the actual facts before including them in his novel. Perhaps he saw that by bringing Marlow into Lord Jim as narrator the work would become "the vehicle for his own spiritual autobiography." There can be little doubt that "the sensibility that lies on the operating table" is Conrad's own. Jim is attracted by romantic dreams, he has a sense of humor that is somewhat like the English humor, and the book has "an extra edge" that owes something to Conrad's Polish background, concludes Tennant. Also Jim and Conrad appear to share "a strong tendency towards 'sympathetic identification'"—for the novelist, an essential qualification, but for the man of action, a fatal flaw." The two parts of the novel deal with two matters, a question of fulfilling the seaman's code and that of fulfilling a dream of power. When Marlow is no longer adequate for probing Jim's sensibility, Stein, who lives "beyond good and evil," creates his own illusions and lives by them as if they were true. And another man, one who has lived a comparable life but stayed within the bounds of convention, the retired adventurer to whom Marlow goes to find a solution to Jim's case, provides an opposing perspective. He thinks that Jim should have gone the way of the majority. These two oracles speak for the two halves of Conrad's soul, as they speak for Marlow's. But the story leaves the conflict unresolved.
Another instance in which Tennant sees Conrad's own experiences in his actual life appears in "A Smile of Fortune," a short novel based on his voyage to Mauritius in 1888. In one way, it seems to be "a kind of long-delayed revenge" for his humiliation over Eugénie Renouf, to whose brother he had made a formal request for her hand twenty-two years before he wrote the story. In this work, he transposed the temptation to marry Eugénie into entirely different terms, "though no doubt expressing what he felt to be the essence of it, by describing the narrator's infatuation with a sensuous, slovenly girl from a disreputable home."

In spite, then, of a very few cavils, we find that Tennant's "obsessive compulsion" to write a biography of Conrad and his insistence that he is not interested in criticism of the works have produced an unusually well-written portrait of a believable and fascinating person. And he has gone beyond his aims—he has included a large amount of very sensitive criticism of many of his works. His achievement consists largely of his producing a good biography of Conrad for everyone, including some penetrating assessment of his work; he is a critic in spite of himself.

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5. SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE--FORSTER ONE HUNDRED YEARS AFTER


Centenary Revaluations, a selection of proceedings from a Forster conference at Concordia University in Montreal, May 1979, is an important addition to Forster scholarship and, in structural design, is a work Forster would approve of. The introduction by Judith Hertz prepares the reader for articles about Forster's politics and philosophy, his use of and relationship to literary history, and varied kinds of analyses of the novels. This sequence is followed by Robert K. Martin's introduction to the "Writer's Panel": Elizabeth Spencer, Bharati Mukherjee, Marie-Claire Blais, James McConkey, and Eudora Welty. The volume concludes with Frederick P. W. McDowell's "Forster Criticism and Scholarship Since 1975," an update of his E. M. Forster: An Annotated Bibliography of Writings About Him (1976). All parts are tied together with an index which appears both sensible and accurate.

In its entirety, the volume is musically structured: topic leads to topic, views counterpoint other views, and the reader may either begin or conclude with McDowell's summation. Most essays are of high quality and offer something new and substantive about Forster the writer and the man. While he is being celebrated, he is also being revalued. The proceedings indicate clearly that the conference achieved its goals.

With a volume of such scope--two introductions, eighteen essays, a writer's panel, and a summation of work to date--a reviewer can only select from the numerous inclusions. Invariably, the act of selection implies a viewpoint, reflects the reader's own interests, and, perhaps, indicates areas in which he is