

CONRAD: MASTER ON SEA AND LAND

By John Macy

JOSEPH CONRAD: LIFE AND LETTERS. *By G. Jean Aubry. 2 vols. Doubleday, Page. \$10.*

ALMOST as a rule the literary artist writes interesting letters. An "official" biography of a writer which was not "Life and Letters" would seem inadequate, and in many cases the letters tell more of the subject than the narrative and explanatory notes of the biographer. I can think of no first-rate novelist, poet, essayist, historian whose private correspondence does not illuminate his work, is not in itself delightful and instructive literature. And sometimes, as in the case of Cowper, a secondary artist, the letters to friends are more charming than the formal compositions. Who would not sacrifice more than one novel or poem to keep the correspondence of Sterne, Johnson, Lamb, Byron, Thackeray, Stevenson, Goethe? Lamb's letters contain as much good criticism as his deliberate essays. There are few more fascinating books in English than Scoones's "Four Centuries of English Letters" or the collection by E. V. Lucas, finely called "The Gentlest Art".

We should take it on faith before examination that Conrad wrote interesting letters. And his letters are indeed even better than one expected them to be. His correspondence is an intimate revelation of his character, his methods of work, his purposes, disappointments, difficulties, admirations for the work of other men. Conrad was a self-conscious, self-appraising artist. He attacked his work with wilful determined application. Those enchanting rhythms and magical phrases were not produced by irrational inspiration — though every great artist has inspired moments — but were carefully, painfully, elaborated. He repeatedly says that writing was a grind. And much of his creative life was filled with depression and weariness. But his superb courage and loyalty to his task did not permit depression to gain control of his spirit. No

writer ever worked harder, more faithfully, with more disinterestedly passionate devotion to the right idea and the right expression of it. A master workman, a model for all who would give their lives to the service of truth and beauty. Not Flaubert himself was more self-scrutinizing, conscientious, exacting of the best that was in him.

All the adventure in Conrad's experience occurred during the first half of his life, his youth and early prime. The second half was uneventful, years of quiet pursuit of his career as man of letters. Stored full of strange seas, magic isles, mysterious jungles, and, more important than all scenes, human beings, normal and eccentric, who roam the earth, he retired from the great round world and was like a beached keel for thirty years.

Conrad is so supremely the prose-poet of the sea that we forget how much of him is on land. He himself objected to being considered a spinner of nautical yarns. "It seems to me," he writes, "that people imagine I sit here and brood over sea stuff. That is quite a mistake. I brood certainly, but . . . 'Youth' has been called a fine sea-story. Is it? . . . Surely those stories of mine where the sea enters can be looked at from another angle. In the 'Nigger' I give the psychology of a group of men and render certain aspects of nature. But the problem that faces them is not a problem of the sea, it is merely a problem that has arisen on board a ship where the conditions of complete isolation from all land entanglements make it stand out with a particular force and colouring. In other of my tales the principal point is the study of a particular man, or a particular event. My only sea-book, and the only tribute to a life which I have lived in my own particular way, is 'The Mirror of the Sea'."

Conrad's primary interest is people. Galsworthy felt this when as a young man on Conrad's ship he heard Conrad tell

"tales of ships and storms, of Polish revolution, of his youthful Carlist gun-running adventure, of the Malay seas, and the Congo; and of men and men". Men and men, they are Conrad's interest. Sometimes, but not in the larger number of the tales, the great waters are the scene upon which the drama is enacted, the conflicts, defeats, triumphs. But I feel sure that if Conrad had never been a seaman, never had adventures in the mysterious East, he would have been a distinguished novelist, a creator of people, of character.

"I don't care for writing at all," he says, strangely enough. "What interests me is creative work." His admiration for Henry James, his *très cher maître*, shows where his heart is. Mere literature does not engage him, but action, truth, human nature, the inner activities of his persons at least as much as their external circumstances. Certainly he is much more than a marine painter. Recall the many tales in which the action takes place on western land or on tropic islands where the sea, to be sure, is adjacent but has little to do with the story. And in the land scenes we may be too much enthralled, if too much be possible, by Conrad's miraculous descriptive power. His purpose, his sense of proportion bid us keep our attention on the characters, their deeds and emotions.

"Lord Jim" lives in the memory not by virtue of the exotic scene, which is indeed unforgettable in its color and mystery, but by the character and fate of the hero. In one of those moods of despondency which every artist feels when he looks upon a finished work and sees that it is not so good as he hoped to make it, Conrad tells Edward Garnett that "Lord Jim" is a "lump of clay", without the "revealing life". Of course he is unfair to his masterpiece. But one sentence is critically significant as showing his purpose here and in his other tales: "I wanted to obtain a sort of lurid light out of the very events". Well, thousands of readers feel that he did exactly that again and again. Note that the emphasis is on the events, not on the scene. As the alert H. G. Wells, responding immediately to "An Outcast of the Islands", truly says:

"He imagines his scenes and their sequences like a master, he knows his individualities to their hearts". But Wells seems to make too much of the exotic novelty of Conrad's material: "He has a new and wonderful field in this East Indian novel of his".

Conrad's field was the world and he found his stories in many places. In "Tales of Unrest" are two amazing short masterpieces, "The Return" and "The Idiots", which Maupassant might have read with fraternal admiration, though of course they are pure Conrad and owe nothing to the French master. In these two stories, and others, the sea and the magical East play no part. Conrad is as much at home in the room of a house on land as in cabin or fore-castle. In a note to "The Return" he phrases his purpose — a purpose which will be found realized in other tales — "The story consists for the most part of physical impressions, impressions of sight and sound". The impressionist was strong in Conrad. He was in quest of "lurid light", which is more subtle and difficult to realize than mere scenic picturesqueness.

Even in remote and uncanny scenes Conrad is bent upon penetrating the heart of man and woman. It is so in "Victory", which is laid in a strange far corner of the earth. Heyst and Lena are affected by their surroundings, by their lonely distance from the places where they were born, yet what happens to them under the tropical trees might have happened under an English elm. It is the inside process, not the outer circumstance that demands the highest capacity in a novelist. And in Conrad this capacity is so powerfully, acutely, developed that he is a great novelist, no mere spinner of yo-heave-ho yarns, but brother of Balzac, of Flaubert, of his beloved Henry James. And because of his adventures in the great world he has a sense of excitement, of vigorous action, greater than any of the more sedentary novelists. That Conrad's whole artistic soul was intent on truth to character is indicated by a brief illuminating note in a letter to a correspondent who had objected to Lena's reserve. Of course the novelist is right, though he is always ready to confess a fault. "I still think," he says,

"the psychology is quite possible. My fault is that I haven't made Lena's reticence *credible* enough. . . . While I wrote, her silence seemed to me truth itself, a rigorous consequence of the character and the situation. It was not invented for the sake of 'the story'."

Sometimes Conrad himself seems to stress the physical scene as in the subtitle to "Nostromo" — "A Tale of the Seaboard". The initial conception of the book was the character, and the fictitious South American republic was a secondary invention. This book, the most powerful and involved of Conrad's novels, cost him two years of mental agony, which included long periods of illness and physical suffering. "Finis" left him exhausted and dissatisfied, and though a few friends cheered him, "Nostromo" was with the public, as he records in a letter to Arnold Bennett, "the blackest possible frost". The reason is not far to seek. It is the most complicated example in all Conrad's work of what Galsworthy notes as his trick of folding a story over and over upon itself. It finally emerges, clear as noon-light, but the way to the conclusion is sometimes entangled, obscure, apparently uncertain as to direction and continuity. The ordinary reader quite properly likes to have a story begin in an understandable, inviting way — a wide-open door through which one can enter and proceed with confidence. Now, the vast epic of "Nostromo" is approached somewhat as the facts would be approached by a curious inquiring stranger. Conrad is very fond of the method of seeming to discover the story as he goes, or of letting his favorite mouth-piece, the discursive Marlowe, unfold it. It is a method which gives verisimilitude and solidity to the whole, and you have to get the whole before you get anything! But this method does not instantly engage the reader's interest, and I confess that in my first ignorant admiration of "Nostromo" twenty years ago, I was puzzled by the sequence of the story and stupidly recorded an objection to it. I know better now and understand how masterfully, how inevitably, it is arranged, how essential this arrangement is to Conrad's deliberate objectivity.

The story of the composition of "Nostromo" is one of the strangest in literary biography. Conrad speaks of the struggle several times in the letters and gives a rather full account of it in "A Personal Record" which, however, is on the whole curiously restrained and tells much less about the man than the letters in which he lets himself go. "All I know is that for twenty months, neglecting the common joys of life . . . I had, like the prophet of old, 'wrestled with the Lord' for my creation, for the headlands of the coast, for the darkness of the Placid Gulf, the light on the snows, the clouds on the sky, and for the breath of life that had to be blown into the shapes of men and women . . . a long, desperate fray. Long! I suppose I went to bed sometimes and got up the same number of times. . . . But I had never been aware of the even flow of daily life. . . . Indeed it seemed to me that I had been sitting at that table surrounded by the litter of a desperate fray for days and nights on end." But after the struggle, as he writes quite calmly to his faithful agent, Pinker, "The result is good. . . . It is very genuine Conrad".

It is inevitable that the critics should have made much of the fact that Conrad was a Pole, and that he was almost perfectly bilingual (trilingual, for he never forgot Polish), and that he might have written in French. He makes it clear that he did not choose between French and English, that he did not master English but that English mastered him. "My faculty to write English is as natural as any other aptitude with which I might have been born. . . . It was I who was adopted by the genius of the language . . . its very idiom I truly believe had a direct action on my temperament. . . . If I had not written in English I would not have written at all."

In "A Personal Record" he says: "The English and Scots seamen (a much caricatured folk) had the last say in the formation of my character". And he did understand the English people, not only the seamen but the land-islanders. As Hugh Walpole justly says of the Fynesin "Chance", they are so English that "we wonder whether Trollope could have done more

finely". Minute scrutiny, not worth the trouble, might discover a few Gallicisms or even "Sclavonicisms" in Conrad's style, but they certainly do not stand out and call attention to themselves. His spoken diction was slightly foreign, a bit French, but not his written idiom. He was a careful, enthusiastic, though not systematic student of English literature. He writes: "My business is not the reading of books — at any rate not the reading of fiction". But he was a close student of much that was finest in contemporary English literature, and he browsed in the established classics. Sometimes in his patient wrestling with his style he felt himself a foreigner, but I think it is little more than the feeling that we all have when we try to gain command of the language that we were born to, for every man is to some extent a foreigner in his native tongue in that he remains all his life a stranger to much of its power and richness. One statement of Conrad's in a letter to R. B. Cunninghame Graham is explicit: "Chaucer I have dipped into, reading aloud as you advised. I am afraid I am not English enough to appreciate fully the father of English literature. Moreover I am in general insensible to verse". Well, to many a born Englishman and American Chaucer's is an alien language.

One story of Conrad's, "Under Western Eyes", is so intensely Slavic that it is doubtful if any man born in western Europe could have conceived it, understood the people, grasped the social and historical details of the situation. He says of it, writing to Galsworthy: "I think that I am trying to capture the very soul of things Russian". And so far as a non-Russian can judge, he has succeeded magnificently. If this novel should come to us as a translation from a modern Russian master, we should accept it without question. I find no record of what Slavic critics think of that novel and the rest of Conrad's work, though there are studies of him in Russian, and he says that he was becoming known in Poland.

Sentences in the same letter to Galsworthy reveal the struggles of the artist and hint again that he sometimes had misgivings about his un-English qualities:

"You don't know what an inspiration-killing anxiety it is to think: 'Is it salable?' There's nothing more cruel than to be caught between one's impulse, one's act, and that question, which for me simply is a question of life and death. There are moments when the mere fear sweeps my head clean of every thought. . . . 'The Secret Agent' may be pronounced by now an honourable failure. It brought me neither love nor promise of literary success . . . I suppose there is something in me that is unsympathetic to the general public, — because the novels of Hardy, for instance, are generally tragic enough and gloomily written too, — and yet they have sold in their time and are selling to the present day. Foreignness, I suppose."

It is not quite explicable why "The Secret Agent" and the much richer "Under Western Eyes" did not find a larger public, for they are, if nothing more, exciting melodramas. Conrad, like every romantic, had in him a strong vein of the melodramatic, which of course he did not allow himself to cheapen or abuse. The appeal to Hardy suggests to any critical reader an important difference. The Conradian method — not always the same in all the stories — is adroit and beautiful; the more you study it, or the more you lend yourself to its magic without any conscious study, the more its power and fineness grow upon you. But it is sometimes a little baffling, slow in getting under way. Whereas Hardy is a born popular story-teller, working usually on an accepted conventional plan, no matter how startlingly original his substance, how terrible and forbidding his theme. His stories "go", all of them from "Far From the Madding Crowd" to "Jude". One quality these two dissimilar masters have in common: immense pity for suffering, and, on the whole, brave mankind. And another: a fatalistic view of human character and the inscrutable god of Chance. And still another: unshakable integrity and will to tell the truth about people, what we have to call (to use a word that is getting tiresome, though Conrad often uses it in his letters and notes) "psychological" insight.

Conrad says that he is not a critic. But

he is. A sensitive, analytical mind like his could not fail to be critical. He is a shrewd and exacting judge of his own work. And his few brief literary papers on James, Maupassant, Cooper, and his comments in letters to his contemporaries, warmed but not distorted by friendship, are penetrating, just, revealing his own artistic ideals in a casual unassuming manner. His letters to H. G. Wells estimate exactly the qualities of that somewhat kindred romancer. His epithet for Wells is ultimate: "Realist of the Fantastic". Nothing better was ever said about Wells than this: "You contrive to give over humanity into the clutches of the Impossible and yet manage to keep it down (or up) to its humanity, to its flesh, blood, sorrow, folly . . . the cunning method of your logic. It is masterly — it is ironic — it is very relentless — and it is very true . . . your diabolical psychology plants its points right into a man's bowels. To me 'The War of the Worlds' has less of that sinister air of truth that arrests the reader in reflexion at the turn of the page so often in 'The Invisible Man'. In reading this last, one is touched by the anguish of it as by something that any day may happen to oneself".

Galsworthy, Conrad's oldest friend among English men of letters, to whom he wrote more often than to any other correspondent, he admired this side idolatry. Some of his remarks on Galsworthy's novels are keen and final, not all affectionate praise: "You want more scepticism at the very foundation of your work. Scepticism, the tonic of minds, the tonic of life, the agent of truth, — the way of art and salvation. . . . There is exquisite atmosphere in your tales. What they want now is more air". On Arnold Bennett's limitation he puts a sure finger, apropos of "A Man From The North": "You stop just short of being absolutely real because you are faithful to your dogmas of realism. Now realism in art will never approach reality. And your art, your gift,

should be put to the service of a larger and freer faith".

Realism and reality. A larger and freer faith. Conrad's own genius is its miraculous blending of romance and reality, of vision and fact, of intelligent sceptical observation and belief, faith, fidelity to the secret, never quite discoverable, soul of life. He respected facts rigidly as one who has kept a seaman's log and knows that it is impossible to navigate on sea or land, in any storm or calm of life, without correct information. Then the artist sees through that information to the inner meanings, to find bearings and direction, the course of human destiny. But he has said it for himself better than any one else can say it about him, in the Preface to "The Nigger of the Narcissus":

"It is only through complete, unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and substance; it is only through an unremitting never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity, to colour, and that the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words. . . . The sincere endeavour to accomplish that creative task . . . is the only valid justification for the worker in prose. And if his conscience is clear, his answer to those who in the fulness of a wisdom which looks for immediate profit, demand specifically to be edified, consoled, amused; who demand to be promptly improved, or encouraged, or frightened, or shocked, or charmed, must run thus: — My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel — it is, before all, to make you *see*. That — and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm — all you demand — and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask."

OUR MODERN DICTATORSHIPS

By Foster Rhea Dulles

ALTHOUGH less than ten years ago a war "to make the world safe for democracy" was brought to a victorious conclusion, the practice of popular government has never been flouted so ruthlessly nor its principles regarded with such scepticism as is the case today. For out of the war and its tragic aftermath of social and economic bankruptcy have been born two powerful dictatorships which deny democracy with a brutal frankness which neither the Kaiser nor the Czar would ever have dared to adopt. In many ways strangely analogous, in other ways at the opposite poles of political thought, Fascism and Communism constitute two absorbing and highly controversial problems of world importance.

It is a curious phenomenon that the dictatorship of Mussolini wins Anglo-Saxon converts who would never tolerate such an abrogation of personal liberty in their own countries. In general their approval seems to be based upon such consideration as an improved railway service, on the theory that Italians, despite Mazzini, Cavour and Garibaldi, are not particularly interested in personal freedom or civil rights. This at least is the impression which one gains from Sir Frank Fox's *Italy Today* (Dodd, Mead, \$4.00). The author has bowed down before the gods of efficiency and finding Italy free from many of the petty ills of democratic countries has become a strong supporter of the Duce. The dictatorship's five years of existence proves to Sir Frank that popular government is no longer the only possible government "for a proud and intelligent people", and with great ingenuousness he proceeds to dissipate the world's misgivings as to the future course of Fascism. He believes that Italy's surplus population may be cared for by economic improvements at home, development of her barren colonies, and by emigration. Subsequently he does not think that "there is the slightest danger

to the peace of Europe" in the demographic problem. And of Fascism after the death of Mussolini he is equally optimistic, believing that the dictator may safely pass on his power to an "adopted successor".

It cannot be said that this book adds very greatly to our knowledge of Italy today, based as it is upon casual visits to that country and apparently avid perusal of campaign literature given to the author by the dictator himself. It rather records Sir Frank's own conversion to Fascism.

Of quite a different type is H. Nelson Gay's *Strenuous Italy* (Houghton Mifflin, \$3.00). Here is a man who really knows and understands Fascism and yet, like the author of "Italy Today", is still its warm advocate. It is his thesis that Mussolini has brought new vigor to the Italian race, that there is progress on every hand, that the population is constantly increasing — "let us multiply", says the Duce — and that Italy has every right to that place in the sun which she is demanding. Quite the opposite of Sir Frank Fox, however, he is convinced that Italy's demographic problem will force the country into war if something is not done about it. But it is Italy's future rather than the peace of the world with which he is chiefly concerned. His book is a frank avowal of much that the enemies of Fascism have said of the future results of Mussolini's course. It is a vigorous exposition of Italy's need for expansion, her determination to expand, and her inherent right to expand. His conclusion is clear that unless Italy's aspirations are satisfied peacefully, then — war. This is plain speaking.

Still another rapt disciple of the Duce is Miss Jeanne Bordeaux, who writes engagingly on *Benito Mussolini — the Man* (Doran, \$5.00) in what the jacket terms "a gripping chronicle of strength". It is at least a new rôle in which she casts her hero, although we suspect that her study is based